

DESERT BLOOMS

AN ANTHOLOGY OF SINDHI
STORIES AND POEMS

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INTRODUCTION

Short Story in Sindhi

HERE is a collection of modern Sindhi short stories and poems. The stories are modern in the strictest sense of the word. The fare provided is a varied one. In selecting the stories a number of factors were borne in mind. Care was taken to make the anthology representative of authors but the main consideration was that the stories should be of interest to the general reader. Other considerations were those that make for quality—strong situation, strong theme and character, technique and construction, humour and pathos, etc. There has to be meat in a story, without which the reader's interest cannot be sustained. Meat may be of substance, may be of form, of treatment or of some other kind, but it must be there.

It is a tricky affair to divide stories compartmentally. All the same, they are being broadly categorised and analysed here, to enable the general reader to enjoy them all the better.

Themes can have a narrow or wide appeal. Those that have a wide appeal and are of an enduring kind, and deal with problems that always face humanity, are naturally to be classed as great. The themes in *Sona And The Flood*, *The Tragedy of Kiran And Kavita* and *Despair* are of such a kind.

Though the themes of *The Scarf*, *The Sweeper Woman Sona*, *Her Cup of Poison* and *In Search Of A Wife*, are perhaps not peculiar to Sindhi society, they cannot be considered great.

There are stories with a powerful situation under the stress of which the plot unfolds and develops, ending inexorably in a fine climax which leaves in the mind of the reader a sense of oppression or at least a feeling that man is helpless and destiny can play a devastating part in his life. To this class belong *Desire Across The Barriers*, *Tell Me A Story*, *The Brahmin's Wife*, *Sona And The Flood* and *The Tragedy Of Kiran And Kavita*.

When local colour and background play a prominent part in a story, its interest will naturally be restricted to the social group to which it relates. *Baloch* is a story of this kind. Balochs came from Balo-

chistan but had become part and parcel of agricultural life in Sind. The whole mental outlook of these people and their background, the language and mode of expression used by them, are faithfully reproduced in the Sindhi story. What is more, these special features of the story have been very successfully transferred to the English language by the translator. Other stories in this volume which have a strong local colour are *The Scarf* and *The Incomparable Phundanmal*; in the latter incidentally another Baloch character figures.

Of the character stories in the volume, *The Incomparable Phundanmal* delineates in a masterly fashion the character of a typical Sindhi master-craftsman. For Sindhis it is a very forceful and authentic re-creation. Effort has been made by the translator to lift all the special features of the original—language, background and character—and embody them in the translation. But only the non-Sindhi reader can say if it carries a peculiar flavour. If it does, rendering it into English was worthwhile.

A unique character story in this volume is *Brother Abdul Rahman*—unique in the sense that it is perhaps the only story ever written in which a character speaks not directly as himself but always through the inner monitor, the everpresent conscience residing in each person. Brother Abdul Rahman has annihilated his ego to such an extent that he keeps himself out of everything and leaves everything to be said and done by his inner conscience or monitor. In other words, he himself speaks and acts only as the monitor dictates. The amusing thing about him is that whatever is addressed to Abdul Rahman, he first communicates to the monitor within him and then he answers, but always as if the monitor himself is speaking: "Tell him that....." It is from that angle that a claim of uniqueness is made for this story, and even some foreign readers have considered it a great story. Apart from the manner in which the dialogue takes place, the story in itself will be found interesting, and the character of Abdul Rahman as that of a peculiar Sindhi Sufi, is bound to linger in the memory of the readers.

An unusual character story is: *He Could Not Figure It Out*, which is about an odd but lovable character, the like of which every community produces now and again. It has humour too, but the end is far from humorous. The story is bound to interest even non-Indians.

There are two other character stories in the volume: *Papar Wali* and *Gokul's Ma*. The former deals directly with conditions brought about by the Partition of India and the hardships which Sind Hindus had to face, and the character of Bhoori shines out of its pages not only while she is present but even after she leaves, when her presence is felt even more while the author builds up her character further with great sympathy and understanding. *Gokul's Ma* is a good and simple soul, living out the last years of her life in the service of other people. She cannot however be an exclusively Sindhi type because of her Sindhi dress. Thousands like her will be found in other parts of India. Her infinite patience, her tact and selflessness are typical certainly of old Sindhi women, but these virtues are supposed to belong to Indian womanhood in general, perhaps to older women in all the lands.

A story which depends for effect entirely on treatment is *The Closed Door*. In reading this story, we see the writer's artistry from beginning to end. The writer subtly plays with the male character somewhat as a cat plays with a mouse.

Humorous stories, generally speaking, make a wide appeal. *Skinflint*, *Nathu And His Goat* and *Naming The Baby* belong to this class. Humour results from character and incidents. This observation is well illustrated by these three stories. *Naming The Baby* in particular is a story cleverly contrived by a comparatively new writer, and on a subject familiar to all.

Finally, there are stories that refuse to be categorised—*Demented*, *An Ear Of Maize*, *The Two Faces* and *Salt Of The Earth*. These are just slices of life, but each with a unity of its own and a purpose. *The Two Faces* may be described as a mood story. It is based on a strong situation, all too familiar, the key-note being struck at the very opening. The brooding mind of the unemployed young man spins out thought after thought, now full of depth, now whimsical—the mood, sad and questioning, prevailing from beginning to end. It is a story that should tug at the heart strings of all those lower middle class young men who have known prolonged unemployment. In *Salt Of The Earth* the writer paints the atmosphere of the scene vividly, and the story is not only moving but brings out a memorable trait in the character of old-time indigent and suffering

Muslim labourers in the Sind of the past—the trail of extreme loyalty before which one must bow one's head with respect.

Here we cannot help observing that Sindhi writers keep on experimenting with new forms and techniques. Stories that illustrate this trend are: *The Tragedy Of Kiran And Kavita*, *Tell Me A Story*, *He Could Not Figure It Out* and in a lesser sense, *Goku's Ma*. The technique in the first story is of carrying the reader back and forth in the time dimension again and again. How many incidents of the past are unfolded in this manner! It was a tough technique the young writer imposed upon himself. It calls to mind the technique which Aldous Huxley employed in his novel "Eyeless in Gaza". But in the novel the back-and-forth technique is chapter-wise and therefore not difficult. In a short story it becomes extremely difficult as will be obvious when *The Tragedy Of Kiran And Kavita* is read, and therefore it is a highly creditable performance. The planning that must have gone into the elaboration of this story is something to be reflected upon by all young writers. The technique used in *Tell Me A Story*, of recounting the main story within the frame-work of another story, is also noteworthy. The simplicity and subtlety of it can pass unnoticed by the average reader. The outer story which serves as frame-work is not static. From the moment the inner story, which is the core, is introduced, the outer too keeps pace with it, till in the end the inner one dies off with a beautiful flash. It is a gem of a story by a veteran writer. In *He Could Not Figure It Out* on the other hand the frame-work is completely static. The whole story unfolds itself in the form of a dialogue between two persons over a cup of tea, and the art of the writer becomes obvious as one goes on reading it. Finally, in *Goku's Ma*, the newness of technique is something slight, but still it is worthy of note, because in the original Sindhi the story starts without a title and the title comes at the end of para one. This story is the writer's very first. It is a healthy sign that many Sindhi short story writers are experimenting with new forms.

Orbit is a story of an intellectual kind and has "sister-complex" for its theme. There are novels in English on sex-relations between brothers and sisters. This story however deals with not a sex relationship but an aspect which, in Sindhi literature at least, is treated

for the first time. The style too is happily suited to the characters and mood of the story, in the original Sindhi.

The Rod is a story of child-psychology under an authoritarian father.

Most of our writers, because of the problem of bread and butter, have little leisure to keep abreast of the changes that are taking place in the art of short story writing abroad. Apart from that the American and British periodicals in which stories of a high standard appear are too numerous and costly for them to buy, as are even the anthologies published abroad from year to year. To go and read them in public libraries would consume too much of their time. Once in a while they may come across new stuff accidentally, but mostly our writers experiment on their own, thinking up new forms—a healthy trend by compulsion—but the stuff so turned out is not always of outstanding merit.

The translator's job is indeed a difficult one—how difficult only the translator knows if he has understood it properly. Every language has a genius of its own. The translator's job is one of transference. He must see that in the process of transference, he does not transform or destroy. Nothing that is germane to the story must be missed and at the same time, literal or too close a translation can destroy everything rather than re-create. One can neither strictly adhere to nor depart from the original except with very great care. The spirit of a writing has to be captured and brought out in an alien medium, and local colour, where possible, retained. Translation is really a mental journey through somebody else's world, and the translator has to tread through that world cautiously. It is far more difficult to translate and re-create a story in another medium than to write an original one. The translators of stories in this volume have done their work in that spirit. And yet they are conscious of the fact that their translations are far from perfect.

The "modern" short story has hitherto meant a story that is compact and well-constructed, with a point, though not necessarily a twist or surprise, at the end. This at any rate was the type that came into vogue after Maupassant, Chekov and O'Henry. These writers and others after them have undoubtedly influenced Sindhi writers.

The current trend abroad would appear to be towards a freedom from compactness and avoidance of the element of surprise at the end. It is a tendency actually making for disintegration, if some of the foreign stories published in the sixties are any guide. In an English anthology published in 1960, says editor John Pudney, "We had always set our heart against atmosphere pieces, or sketches which disdained to be burdened with characterisation or plot, but some of the new writing which now reaches us, though it may fall short of a beginning, a middle and even an end, does seem to be something more than literary exuberance or pattern weaving. It reflects a more serious integration of the writer with his surroundings. This is not to say that it is enslaved to the painstaking pursuit of realism. What, in fact, really makes it interesting to us, is that it is imaginative writing somehow liberated from the stodgy plot-building.....that we used to see ten years ago." But the thinnest story, if it is to be called a story at all, has to be based on some arrangement of incidents, which means plot, and therefore, any writer scoffing at plot does so at his own peril. If during the process of reading a story, a discerning reader asks questions like, "What is the purpose, of this bit?" "What is it all about?" and if such a story makes no sense to a number of intelligent readers, the conclusion is inescapable that either the story-writer and publisher are not quite normal persons or the readers are fatheads.

There is a kind of story that can tell on the nerves of a reader—interminable introspection, too much psychological analysis and tortuous verbosity, holding up the story's progress. If more than half of a story has to be waded through with effort before it begins really to make sense, however good and strong it may turn out to be at the end, it cannot be called a top-class story because it is late in coming up.

A story may be thin, but if it is to develop into something big, the build-up around the core must be such as to hold the readers' attention. There *are* such stories, and many of them are great. Fine descriptions showing a power of imagination and the gift of phrase by themselves achieve little if there is no point to a story. In a short story, because it is short, endless descriptions of the background, however effective pictorially, are not justified. Atmosphere

and more atmosphere alone is not what the reader of a short story wants. There must be more story than background painting. A great story is one that is long remembered. That is the only criterion and a great story is made out of situation, theme and character, occasionally by treatment.

The current trend of disintegration and complete disregard for form is however not wide-spread, as happens to be the case with contemporary art and in a limited way with contemporary western classical music consisting of pure sounds, unconnected, patternless, incomprehensible—pure sounds, yes, as any sounds are pure sounds but unless they are strung together in intelligible sequence to make musical phrases, and phrases woven together to make a melody, they are to the average but well-trained listener, lunatic sounds at large, something frightful to hear. Fortunately, for the contemporary artist there are plenty of *nouveau riches* to pay high prices for his daubs of colour, and in music too the field is wide enough with the help of publicity, music halls and the gramophone. In the short story such a calamity is unthinkable because short stories are written mostly for the ordinary reader and published in magazines.

The idea of some Indian writers that we should not import foreign influences in insular and absurd. Culture is a commodity so precious that we should loot it anywhere we find it. It costs nothing, and those whom we loot are glad and proud to be looted. To resist the influence of anything progressive found abroad is to betray an inferiority complex. The modern short story as a great literary form is a product of the West. Therefore any developments abroad in the matter of form, technique and treatment should be studied carefully by our writers and to the extent possible transplanted in our own literatures. They may be transplanted if suiting our genius, they may be adapted, or they might suggest directions in which our own forms can grow.

That the Sindhi short story writers of today should have achieved so much against odds is something to marvel at. What is the total population of Sindhis in India? Barely eighteen lakhs or so as against crores in every other language group in the country. Thus in other language groups there is a vast reading public which advantage the Sindhi writers do not enjoy. Therefore, there must be

an inner urge in the writers who are almost all office-workers, teachers and traders and for whom writing is not a source of income at all. That a small language group like the Sindhis should be able to put forth a volume of short stories of a standard comparable in every way to the best produced by other very much larger language groups is a fact that cannot fail to impress. It may even be claimed that stories like *Sona And The Flood*, *The Tragedy of Kiran And Kavita*, and *Desire Across The Barriers*, will stand comparison with some of the best modern short stories written in other countries. That these stories dealing with the larger themes of life with permanent values are the work of writers between 30 and 45 is a matter for pride for the Sindhis.

They have undoubtedly a long way to go yet, but this anthology will show that some of them are definitely capable of developing and producing short stories that will stand comparison with the best written even abroad. May this volume serve as an incentive to them. But at this stage it is best for them, as for all other Indian writers, to remember the wise words of Sean O'Faolain: "Stories, like whisky, must be allowed to mature in the cask. And that takes so much time!.....I shall be content if half a dozen, if even three or four of my stories that have taken thirty years to write are remembered fifty years hence." Sindhi short story writers would do well to consider these words and follow the advice given. A dozen stories written and published in a year, without being allowed to mature like whisky in the cask, will bring them less fame than one or two in a year that are allowed to mature.

T. H. ADVANI

THE ROD

(*Sugan Ahuja*)

“WHAT I want to know is, how did he break the mirror—spawn of a pig!” demanded Khushiram as he came out of the bathroom, addressing Giani who was in the kitchen.

Giani did not look up. As she mixed pulse with the dough, she quietly said, “Your shirt is hanging by the nail and you will find your trousers in the trunk.”

“Will you look up and speak to me, woman?” Khushiram said in a huff. “We’ll assume I have put on my shirt and trousers. How am I to comb my hair?”

“While you put on your clothes I’ll go and fetch a mirror from the neighbour’s as I did yesterday,” Giani replied, still without lifting her head.

“Time enough to put on clothes, woman. What I want to know is, aren’t you mad on your son? This is the third mirror he has broken in two months!”

Giani stopped rolling the *chapati**, and gave him a hard look. “It is six days since he broke it,” she said, “but you have not punished him yet, have you? I hit him with the rolling-pin there and then; I don’t know when *you* are going to vent your anger on him!”

“Is that your answer? You are his mother and yet you ask me to chastise him!”

Giani was busy smoothing the edge of the *chapati* on the hot plate. “Till you buy another, he will be half dead with fear that any time you are going to punish him,” she said. She turned over the *chapati* and then looked straight into his eyes. Slowly she added. “The serpent’s bite may not kill, but the dread of it might. Better wallop him and be done, so that the poor lad’s agony of fear which he goes through from day to day may end.” Khushiram tightened the bath towel round his waist, and turned to Giani again. “Perhaps you do not know that I am trying to think up a new punishment for him.” With a deep sigh he added, “But in six days I have

*Unleavened bread

not been able to hit upon a punishment that will put the fear of God in him and make him give up this kind of mischief for good."

Bitterly Giani remarked, "Do you have to think hard for six days what punishment to give to your children? Have you ever thought of spending six minutes in showing them affection?"

"That doesn't seem necessary", he replied. "You shower upon them so much love that mine would be superfluous."

"A mother's love is different from the father's. The one cannot make up for the other," she replied as she dipped her hands in the water vessel nearby.

"True, quite true", Khushiram said, laughing lightly.

She rose, shook off the dripping water from her wet hands, and asked, "Is that all you have to say?"

Khushiram laughed again and said, "No. The truth you have uttered makes me want to tell you something."

He was smiling and Giani looked at him in apprehensive expectation. Khushiram put his hands on her shoulders and looked into her eyes. Then, in a confidential tone he said, "I'll tell you, but don't let the kids know. Every night I leave my bed, cross over to where they sleep and stroke them lovingly. And I carry their photos in my pocket."

Giani let out a sigh of relief and lowered her eyes. "May God reward you for it!", she said picking up a napkin to dry her hands. "But even that cannot be called love because those whom you love remain unaware of it."

"You be content with your mother-love. How should you understand a father's?"

With a deep sigh Giani made abruptly for the outer door to fetch a small mirror from Soma's mother, their neighbour. Khushiram turned round quickly and put his hands again on her shoulders. He pressed them gently and said, "You look lovely today!"

She jerked his hands off and went out.

Three or four days passed but Shyam got no thrashing. Each night, however, the boy went to bed feeling certain that on the morrow he would be woken up to receive a beating. And when that didn't happen, and both he and his brother Ram were getting ready to go to school, the fear still gripped him and each minute he suffer-

ed in his imagination the pain of the expected beating. At home, however, his imagination worked somewhat hazily. It was in the class-room during the sweet small-talk of the new teacher that he found more time to think about it and go through the pain more sharply.

A few more evenings passed, nights passed, without anything happening, leaving Shyam perplexed and gloomy. One morning, the boy got out of his bed and went up to his father of his own accord. "Why don't you beat me, then?" he demanded.

Khushiram got the surprise of his life. Staring hard, he tried to recognise his son in the boy of eight who stood before him, and who had this time addressed him in the singular "Thou" instead of the respectful plural "You". What the hell was this two-foot kid of eight years saying?

A sharp slap suddenly stung Shyam's cheek, and Khushiram looked in anger at the mother who had administered it.

In a choked voice she bawled out, "You are destined to receive both love and punishment from your mother only, my unfortunate sons." So saying, she fell to crying and dragged both Shyam and Ram with her into the kitchen.

Khushiram observed everything in complete silence while getting ready to go to work.

That evening he bought a small mirror on his way home and hung it up in its proper place.

Soon he saw Shyam standing near him combing his hair, holding the mirror in his left hand. Khushiram took no notice and got busy with his dinner.

Suddenly the mirror fell from Shyam's hand. Ram, Giani and Khushiram, all started visibly. They did not look at the floor. They looked into Shyam's face. The mirror had been broken. Shyam picked it up, examined it and then walked out with it. At the outer door he stopped and dashed the mirror on the floor, smashing it to smithereens.

Giani and Ram flung a glance at Shyam who stood sulking, and then turned to look at Khushiram, in fearful suspense. Khushiram put down the glass of water he was drinking and turning to

Ram, quietly said, "Sweep up the bits from the floor and deposit them in some place where they will not cause injury to anyone."

Ram did as he was told.

After finishing his dinner without hurrying, Khushiram passed by Shyam and went out of the house. He did not return till late in the night.

Giani now approached Shyam and with infinite patience she asked, "What made you do that, my son? Why are you so destructive?"

"But then, why doesn't father punish me? If he postpones it, he will beat me more!" Shyam replied crying.

"Silly boy, if he had wanted to beat you for breaking the mirror last time he would have done it long ago," his mother answered.

"You are not telling the truth", the boy replied. "The other day you asked him to punish me and he told you he was trying to think out a new punishment. Ram and I were standing outside and overheard your talk."

"Very well, my boy, when that happens, Ram and I will come to your rescue. Now you just forget all about it."

"You will protect me even though I broke the mirror in your presence?"

"My son, forget all about the mirrors you have broken. Don't break any more."

"I shall promise that if you give me your word that you will not leave me alone with father at any time. The moment he comes into the house you must be by my side. And if he starts beating me, you must save me at once—at once!",

"I give you my word. Now get into the room and I shall tell you a story about a very, very good boy," the mother said coaxingly. She lay down by his side in his bed. "Once upon a time there was a very, very nice boy....."

"Mother", Shyam interrupted, "You know so many stories about very nice boys; don't you know one about a very, very nice father?"

His words tore the mother's heart to shreds. She put her hand over the boy's mouth, drew him to her lovingly and kept him locked in her embrace. The boy remained in expectation of hearing a story about a nice father, but Giani was silent and sorrowful. Shyam

tried to make up such a story for himself, and soon crossed over into the world of dreams. Soon Giani also fell asleep.

Because of the constant fear of punishment the least little sound used to wake up Shyam. On this night too he was startled out of his sleep by a disturbance outside the house. Finding that his mother also had been awakened and was about to get up he lay still, eyes closed, but ears alert. Giani withdrew her arm gently from under his neck and sat up. From the talk going on outside she could make out that some drunks were quarrelling.

"The number of drunkards is increasing in Kalyan—the devil take them!" She remarked to herself. She lay down again. Shyam heard her and knew that she was right.

Two men passed below the open window. Said one to the other, "When you are beaten in a drunken state, you don't feel it so much, and....."

An idea flashed into Shyam's mind. He thought over it and decided that the best way to fortify himself against his father's punishment was to get drunk. Then, even his mother's presence would not be necessary.

He went over the matter in detail thus: there is a tree in front of our house; behind the tree is a shop; at the back of the shop is another house; behind that again is a buffalo pen; in one corner of the pen is a large earthen vat; behind the vat Moola buries bottles in the soft ground; his small daughter Ganga has seen him dig them out; his own father had twice sent him for a couple of bottles on two occasions when friends visited him from Bombay; the liquor was of two kinds—one costing two rupees a bottle and the other three rupees, the latter good, the former not so good; tomorrow is Sunday; for a beating such a long day will come again after a whole week; where mother keeps her money I know."

Shyam turned on his side towards his mother and hugged her tightly.

Sunday morning Shyam sprang out of his bed and rushing through all the operations of cleansing his mouth with a tooth-stick, bath and breakfast, all in half an hour or so, he picked up his school books and sat on his bed reclining against the wall, to appear studious. His mother, father and brother smiled covertly at this unusual

phenomenon, and were pleased. Shyam kept stealing glances at the clock. He knew that even in rain and gale, his father, from a settled habit of many years, would tuck his newspaper under his arm, light a *bidi* and go out exactly at eight o'clock to visit Bahroomal's place and return not before it was ten.

Khushiram used to read the newspaper from cover to cover, including advertisements. Where he sat as a public clerk, all persons stood in awe of him because of his knowledge of matters social and political. And he loved to show himself off in the company of old Bahroomal, long-retired *Mukhtiarkar* (revenue officer), and his circle of friends.

At quarter to eight, Shyam's brother Ram picked up his satchel to go and study at his maternal cousin's place and exactly at eight his father put the weekly 'Hindvasi' under his arm, lighted a *bidi* and went out smiling after throwing a glance in the direction of Shyam.

Shyam left his cot and looked about stealthily to find out where his mother was and what she was doing. Giani had carried the cooking utensils out and left them on the back door-step to scour and wash, and now from the kitchen she was fetching a low stool on which to sit and do the job.

Shyam went back into the room, removed an empty canvas bag that hung from a nail, rolled it up and put it on the bed. He went out again to make sure his mother was still at her job. Returning, he went over to where his mother's keys hung from another nail in the wall, and removed them to open her trunk. He did this, took out three rupees, locked it up again and put the keys back in their place.

While hiding the bottle of illicit liquor behind the sack of coal, Shyam congratulated himself on having outwitted the bootlegger Moola. "The fool! Tells me, you go and I'll bring it over myself! I thought of a ruse and told him father has said that I must bring it home myself and hide it behind the coal sack so that mother won't notice it."

When his mother finished with the utensile she found the boy still glued to his books. It made her very happy, and turning to him with a smile she said, "I am going for a bath, son. Keep an eye on the kitchen door. See that no dog or cat strays inside."

Giani secured the latch of the adjoining bathroom door. Shyam rose from his seat. He took out the watch from his father's coat and slipped into the kitchen.

"What are you pounding in the *hamam dusta*?"* his mother suddenly yelled from the bathroom.

"Only black pepper, mother."

"But my dear boy, why are you bothered about that?" she asked. At the same time she reflected that he was a little boy after all and might as well indulge in his whim. All work and no play..... though it did seem to her an odd way for a boy to divert his mind, pounding black pepper! Black pepper? But there are no pepper seeds in the kitchen! Hadn't she run out of stock a few days back, and wasn't she planning each day to go and buy some? A vague idea crept into her mind; she tied the towel round her hips. Quickly she covered her torso with her thin muslin-shoulder-piece and unlatched the bathroom door.

She saw Shyam running out of the kitchen. The bottle of liquor in his hands flashed in the sunlight and she stared at it wide-eyed. A vague fear oppressed her mind. Forgetting the *hamam dusta* she ran after her son. Shyam had quickly uncorked the bottle and put it to his mouth, but Giani seized his wrist with one hand and with the other she snatched the bottle from him. Putting it down she smacked his face hard repeatedly.

"Foolish boy!" she shouted at him, panting with the effort. "How old do you think you are to drink liquor, and that too undiluted? Whoever taught you this bad habit? Where did you get that bottle?"

"I stole three rupees from your trunk", he confessed, "and bought it from Moola in father's name. And I pounded father's watch in the *hamam dusta*, the one he bought for a hundred and fifty rupees. Now he will beat me hard. But, no, I won't feel the beating, this bottle of liquor....." The boy would have carried on in this spirit of bravado, had not a few blows descended upon him. "So that you won't feel, eh?" she mimicked. Panting, she administered him some more blows and cried out, "Let me see how you don't feel these, you blasted brat! So cunning at this age? There is only one cure for you

*Heavy iron or brass pestle and mortar chiefly for reducing to powder by pounding

and that is walloping. I'll call your father right away to rid you of the demon that possesses you!"

The sound of beating and high words had drawn a couple of boys from the neighbourhood. Giani called out to them, "Kumar ! Ramesh ! will you go and fetch Shyam's father at once from old Bahroomal's house, please !"

Till now Shyam had quietly borne his mother's blows without flinching, from sheer stubbornness. When he saw Kumar and Ramesh running post-haste to summon his father, he lost his nerve. His mind pictured to itself the awesome face of his father, and he screamed in terror. He jerked his arm free from his mother's grip with a great single effort, and bolted. He ran in the direction of the railway station. Not once did he look behind.

From that day on, Khushiram and his neighbours have kept searching for the boy. It is five years now since Shyam ran away from his home.

(TRANSLATED BY T. H. ADVANI)

MAHOMEDRAM

(*Kirat Babani*)

HE CALLED himself Mahomedram. Some considered him a truly religious man though eccentric in his behaviour, others put him down as an impostor. But there were quite a few who looked upon him with the eye of faith and treated him with respect, even veneration.

He was a fakir—a beggar but also a king, because true fakirs are above want, independent, above making requests. He was, however, strange in his appearance and behaviour. Sometimes he would be seen wearing ear-rings and a long coarse woollen overgarment, his head covered with a pointed cap, a beggar's cup in his hand, a string of shining glass beads round his neck—all typical externals of a Muslim fakir, and he would shout: "Must Qalander."* At other times he would be found wearing a saffron robe, carrying a wooden water bowl in his hand—both symbolic of a Hindu ascetic—and shouting: "Bay-unt!"@ At one time his head and face would be a tangle of over-grown hair, at another, these would be clean shaven. On one foot he would have a country shoe with a curled up toe and on the other a sandal or just dried grass tied up with long strips of old cloth.

He never had a fixed abode, but was always on the move—now in one village, then in another. Seldom would he spend more than a day and a night at one place. His philosophy was: 'An ascetic must-be peripatetic.' But he had a special affection for the small town of Bhiryan. He would visit it again and again and stay there for a week or two. Who he was and from where he had come, no one knew, nor had anyone tried to find out.

He always carried a club with him, and from the cord tied round his waist hung a time-piece that was out of order. How and when he had come by it was also not known to anyone. Once some one tried to make fun of him and said, "O fakir, the hands of your time-piece have never moved ever since you have been seen wearing it." The fakir replied with a smile, "This time-piece announces a great truth silently.

*A wandering Muslim hermit's invocation.

@A Hindu form of invocation.

You have only to try and understand it. You people believe that time moves. Can you tell me whether during the past twenty-five years you have changed or time has changed? Time is unconditioned and ever the same. Day and night, winter and summer—these are the same always. Everything in the universe changes, but we say time has moved. Time has no beginning and no end. Have you ever seen time moving?"

The other fellow was not one to accept defeat easily. He wanted to show how smart he was. So he asked.. "But why have you put the two hands of the time-piece together?"

"Because both mean the same thing," came the reply.

"What mean the same thing?"

"Mahomed and Ram," replied the fakir.

"But why do both point to the figure XII?"

"Because from two you get twelve."*

The onlookers saw that there was method in the fakir's madness, and the smart fellow, abashed, took to his heels.

Another time, someone else tried to poke fun at him: "Tell me fakir, why do you use a hotch-potch name for yourself? You have made *khichri*** of it."

With extreme patience and humility, the fakir replied, "Do you know that when a man is sick, the *hakim*† prescribes liquid food like *khichri* for him?"

Mahomedram used to visit Hindus as well as Muslims. He would spend the night in a temple and the day in a mosque. He would recite the Muslim *Kalma*, "La ilaha illallahu muhammad-ur-rasoolillah" and also repeat the Hindu mantra of "Om". He greeted the Hindus with "Ram Ram." and the Muslims with "Salaam Alaikum." One day, passing through a village he walked into the village temple. The temple-priest was taken aback, seeing him in Muslim dress. Harshly he asked him who he was. "Mahomedram", the fakir-replied.

"Your religion and caste?" the priest enquired with a show of authority.

"Pak," the fakir said, meaning 'pure'.

*Reference to the Sindhi proverb, two means twelve

**A mixture of rice and pulse

†Native doctor

The priest lost his temper.

"No nonsense or pretence, man. Are you a Hindu or a Muslim?"

The fakir was not perturbed.

"If you will give up your own pretence of being a Hindu and think a little, you will know what I am."

It was a peculiarity of his to greet with strong language anyone, Hindu or Muslim, on whom he bestowed the favour of a visit. He spared no one. And none dared answer back or show displeasure. If he visited a stall or shop, he not only showered abuse on the owner but also freely laid hands on whatever took his fancy and put it away in his knap-sack. But it had been noticed that he passed such loot to any needy person he met in his ramblings.

He had a special feeling for Tikam the tea-shop man, and would sit in his shop for hours on end. Tikam too had a friendly regard for the fakir and served him tea and food with genuine affection. The fakir was fond of tea and enjoyed taking snuff. Knowing this, Tikam always put these two things before him whenever he entered his shop. One day, the fakir took a handful of biscuits from a container and passed them to a beggar woman standing outside, and at the same time he called Tikam all sorts of names. Tikam listened in silence, and put a glass of tea in front of him. The fakir poured the tea down a gutter and turning to Tikam asked, "Have you got five rupees, Tikam?"

"Right now, I have not, Master," Tikam replied with perfect composure.

"If I should be in urgent need, right now?" the fakir asked.

"I shall arrange to get it for you, if you so wish."

"Do not delay, then."

Tikam went out of his shop to borrow the money from someone and soon returned and put it down before him. But although he had complied with the fakir's wish without hesitation, a slight doubt had arisen in a remote corner of his mind as to the wisdom of his action. To put his mind at ease, he left some one in charge of his shop and followed the fakir at some distance. Mahomedram was seen entering a cloth shop where he bought some material, put it in his knap-sack and proceeded on his journey. Having gone the whole length of the main road of the village, he took a narrow path in another direction. He reached a ramshackle hut in an isolated area, opened the door and

entered. Tikam, too had come close to the hut. He peeped in through a hole in the thatched wall. What he saw made his heart miss a beat. Inside the hut lay a corpse, and by its side sat a poverty-stricken woman in old tattered clothes and two naked children, all crying silently. Mahomedram took the material out of his bag and covered the dead body. What had remained of the five rupees, he put in the woman's hands. There were tears in Tikam's eyes, and he made his way back for his shop at once.

Mahomedram, it was well-known, disliked the Maulavi* of the village. It was said that the fakir had gone to the mosque one evening to sleep for the night. The Maulavi did not want him to use the mosque.

"You are an infidel," he had told him. "You are too intimate with the Hindus and eat their bread. You do not observe Muslim religious practices. You have no claim on this house of Allah, the Pure. By what right can a man without religion step into the house of God?"

Mahomedram made no reply at the time, but quietly retraced his steps. But after exactly one week he took five men with him as witnesses and knocked at the door of Maulavi's house at the hour of midnight. The Maulavi opened the door and presently being caught red-handed in some act unworthy of his calling, fell at Mahomedram's feet and begged of him to go away and not to expose him. The next morning, people passing by the mosque read the following words on its wall. "God has been banished from this hitherto undefiled abode of His. Now it has been given over to Satan." Never did he step into that mosque again.

One day he suddenly returned from his peregrinations and appeared at the open granary of Seth Mirchumal, while apportionment of the grain was in progress between the Seth and his peasants. Seth Mirchumal sat on a cot nearby chanting "*Radhe Shyam*"** while his agents weighed out the produce. Hearing the fakir's cry of "Must Qalander," they were all filled with a nervous fear. The Seth, however, tried to appear unruffled and ordered his agent to give five measures of grain to the fakir and send him away. Mahomedram laughed loudly, and said, "Seth Sahib, the common man looks after Mahomedram's modest

*Muslim divine

**Shyam was Lord Krishna and Radha a girl playmate in His boyhood. She is a symbol of true love for the Lord

need in the matter of food in his lifetime. As for cloth, for a sheet to cover him at death he does not bother. If the Hindus get hold of his body they will cremate it; if the Muslims get at it, they will bury it and cover it up with earth. It is you who are worried about your future. So you may keep the five measures of grain for your own use. I give it to you in charity. Instead of giving me five measures, only ask your agent not to cheat the poor peasants by under-weighing their share. Under one of the pans of the scale he has stuck a big piece of bee's wax. Ask him to remove it."

So saying, he passed on. Seth Mirchumal was exposed and the chant of *Radhe-Shyam* took wings from his tongue like dry leaves before an autumn wind.

Another time he suddenly appeared at Tikam's tea shop after a long interval. Mukhi* Dholandas sat sipping tea and smoking a *bidi*.† According to his habit, the fakir shouted, "Must Qalander," as he stepped into the shop. The fakir's greeting should have been returned by Tikam but was not, whereupon Mahomedram turned upon him with anger and abuse.

"You son of Tikam, are you averse to saying, 'Must Qalander', as people are averse to returning pledged goods even after the pledge has been redeemed? You know, don't you, that Mukhi Dholandas calls himself the biggest man in town and considers himself a respectable man, but he refuses to return two gold ear-rings to the poor woman Rahima Vachhani which she had deposited with him as security against a loan of ten rupees, though she has now repaid the amount to him? Let the Mukhi Sahib perform the marriage of his son and daughter with the help of those two ear-rings, and—here! take these two rupees from me, and give them to Mukhi Dholandas as my contribution when his son and daughter marry."

Having fired this long volley, he walked out and disappeared into thin air.

On that day, he showed himself in the town square, and what a look he wore! His eyes emitted fire. His lips trembled and his whole body shook. He dribbled at the mouth as he roared and abused every one. He pulled off turbans and caps from the heads of the most elder-

*The Chief in a village or a town

†Indigenous cigarette

ly among the passers-by, a gesture of extreme disrespect. No one dared go near him or ask him the cause of his anger. When he had done with abusing, he went to the centre of the square and addressed the people thus:

"Listen everyone of you, the poor and the rich, listen to me attentively. Old Karimdad considers himself Ruler in his village. He salves his conscience by saying he is a servant of the people. He preaches from the mosque and the inn. It is well-known that he has three wives living. And now he proposes to marry a fourth—this time a young girl of fourteen. He has one foot in the grave, and one on the edge of the grave. He says he is without an issue and must keep the male line of his family going. Therefore he must try a fourth wife. Will some one tell this man that no *kushta** is going to re-juvenate his bone and muscle and give him virility to beget children after this. And, go and tell Dina that he should commit suicide rather than give his golden daughter of fourteen in marriage to this carrion of Karimdad for the two hundred rupees that he will get for her. It would have been better if he had strangled his daughter when she was born. It is difficult for any decent man to live in the despicable atmosphere and conditions that prevail here now. Mahomedram will not live a moment longer among people who have no sense of shame. This town should be razed to the ground as the ancient city of King Dalurai was."†

With a shower of such words poured on the heads of bystanders he went away at last and was never seen or heard of again.

(Translated by T. H. Advani)

*Aphrodisiae or tonic

†An iniquitous Raja in Sindhi folklore whose capital city was destroyed by an earthquake because of his iniquities

DESIRE ACROSS THE BARRIERS

(K. S. Balani)

AS SUNLIGHT streamed into the kitchen through the open window, and fell on the Brahmin woman Prabha, her body tingled, and her face flushed. In the sunlight, the glass bangles on her wrists glittered like gold, and as she scrubbed the utensils, turning them round and round, the bangles danced and clinked, sounding sweetly to her ears. An inner voice bid her cast off even these glass bangles because their sound stimulated her desires, reviving the memories of her husband. Gold and silver ornaments being taboo to a widow, she had stripped herself of all these. Now she wore glass bangles only and she had come to love them. So she simply rolled up her sleeves and pushed them up, where they had no free play.

Her household chores done, she raised her head and perceived that a tress of her hair had slipped down her forehead. She twisted the truant lock and put it back in its place. But it would not stay put and slid down again and again. She decided to clip it. She went into the main room, picked up her scissors, and stood before the mirror. In the mirror, she saw the reflection of incoming Vinay Kumar and started.

"Don't! To spoil beauty is a great sin," Vinay Kumar expostulated, placing his hand on her shoulder.

Out of modesty she covered her head.

"Please take your hand away, Vinay Kumar," she said.

"It is.....heavy."

"Shall I cut it off?" he asked sadly.

"Eat your food first. Then deal with it as you like."

"You are hard and cruel, Brahminee."

She looked at him and considered her widowed state. "If I am not strict I shall be utterly lost," she argued with herself.

Vinay Kumar took her hand and tried to draw her near. But she pulled herself free. She slipped away into the kitchen and there noticed the footprints of a dog. She stood aghast. Coming out she saw a small dog sitting near the outer door. It was a plump little thing, with

a shabby white coat and large grey eyes. She stared at it. Without moving, the dog too looked fixedly at her, as if pleading to be kept and looked after. But a dog has no place in a Brahmin's house and she felt no pity for it. She raised the end of her Sari to save it from being polluted and pushed the dog out with her foot. She went back into the kitchen and daubed the floor afresh with cow-dung. She came out with a *thali** filled with food for Vinay Kumar, but found he was not there. She looked out of the house and saw him walking away. She thought of calling him back but held herself in check, fearing that it would violate custom and convention. She also apprehended a gradual growth of intimacy.

She took the *thali* back into the kitchen.

She felt restless. In the verandah her infant child lay on a low cot. She went over and, bending down, pressed it to her bosom. She kissed the child again and again, which calmed her somewhat. With tears in her eyes, she looked at her husband's picture on the wall and sadly recalled the happy days that were no more. Memories come rushing in a stream and flowed past. The bond with her husband and the idea of belonging to him reasserted themselves. Involuntarily, full of desire for him, she moved towards the picture. Her face was flushed in anguish. As she clung to the picture her bangles accidentally broke and the glass over the picture cracked. Prabha trembled. Her heart pounded and her body was in pain as if pierced by a hundred needles. Feeling dizzy, she sat down on the baby's cot.

Since early morning she had not had food or water. She rose and went into the kitchen. She found the *thali* empty. The dog had cleaned it up and stood there licking its lips. She was angry with the dog, angry with herself and angry with Vinay Kumar. She drove out the dog, filled another *thali* with food and started eating. She took small morsels and ate the food slowly and thoughtfully, in an effort to understand why Vinay Kumar relished her cooking so much. She enjoyed her food so well that thoughtlessly she ate up everything there was in the cooking pots. For the first time she realised that the food cooked by her was really tasty. Hitherto she had considered it her duty to feed others only. What she ate herself had not mattered. Now she realised that she had been unfair to herself.

*Metal dish

At noon her school-going son Chandru returned and the dog seeing the door open followed him in. Her child's food being more important she did not bother to drive out the dog. She was about to go into the kitchen when she remembered that she had eaten up all the food there was. She hated herself for her greed and now wished she had rather starved herself.

"Mummy, what about my food?" the boy asked.

"This wretched dog ate up your food," Prabha replied, feeling miserable.

"Oh, it does not matter, I shall keep it as a pet."

As he bent down to fondle the dog, his mother gently pushed him aside.

"Never touch a dirty animal, son," she said to him. She drove out the dog, bolted the door and went into the kitchen to light the fire.

Soon there was a knock on the door.

"Who is it?" she asked.

"Vinay Kumar."

She did not move.

Vinay Kumar called out, "Brahminee."

She did not reply.

He called out again, "Open the door, Brahminee. I have brought *mithai* for Chandru."

Hearing of *mithai*, Chandru ran and opened the door. Taking it from Vinay Kumar, he came eagerly to his mother. She smacked his face hard and the *mithai* fell from his hand. The boy was dazed and his eyes filled with tears. He could not understand why he was punished. Vinay Kumar too was surprised. He thought of leaving, but changed his mind and took Chandru's hand. He saw that Prabha was also crying.

"I am taking Chandru to the bazaar," Vinay Kumar said to her.

Prabha looked out of the window and saw Vinay Kumar and her son walking away hand in hand. The dog was following them.

* * * * *

It was a cold night. The two children slept soundly in their beds. Prabha lay in her bed, reflecting that Vinay Kumar was without a wife, she was without a husband and the little dog was without a home. The thought oppressed her. She got out of bed, and picking up the lantern,

raised its wick and went out into the courtyard to look for the dog. Not finding it anywhere, she concluded that it must have found shelter in some corner or recess. She felt easy in her mind. As she dimmed the light she noticed a little movement in a pile of dirty clothes lying in a corner. She went over and saw the little dog sleeping comfortably, and a wave of compassion swelled up within her.

The next morning Prabha had to face a problem because of the dog. It had defiled the room by relieving itself in two or three places. She was dismayed to find that the place where the gods were offered food was also desecrated. For a long time she remained worried and angry, not knowing what to do. In that state she forgot to make preparations for the morning worship of the images. She remembered this duty only when devotees started coming in with offerings of fruits and flowers. Vinay Kumar had also appeared on the scene and he quickly took in the situation. He went out and returned very soon with a scavenger. A scavenger as an untouchable is not permitted inside a sacred place, but the Brahminee had no choice.

After the excreta had been removed, she washed and cleaned the place. She took her bath and sat down for worship. Today there was an unusual appeal in her invocation to the gods. Perhaps to appease them she had put all her soul in her chant. Worship over, food was offered to the gods. When the consecrated food and water were distributed, she saw the dog sitting behind the devotees. She gave it a hard look. The dog seemed to sense her anger, looked at Vinay Kumar and slunk away.

When she was alone, she got another surprise. The consecrated food that was left over had been eaten up by the dog.

Strangely enough, the dog seemed determined not to leave the Brahminee's house. Days passed. Prabha's attitude towards the dog was now of compassion, then of aversion. Sometimes she would allow it to come in and feed it, at other times she would drive it out and let it starve.

The little dog would often run up to Chandru and put his head in his lap or roll on the ground in front of him, wanting to be petted. At night the Brahminee would put it out of the house and the dog would go on scratching on the door and whining. The Brahminee would smile

faintly but despite her feeling of compassion she never again made the mistake of allowing the dog inside at night.

* * * * *

Deep silence prevailed all around. The low barking of the dog had ceased. She recalled how one night she had heard a gentle knock on the door. At first she had not answered, but soon gathering all the strength of her mind she had asked, "Who is there?"

"Vinay Kumar," the reply had come.

Opening the door slightly, she had asked what had brought him at that late hour.

"Don't you feel lonesome, Prabha?" he had asked with some hesitation.

"So what?"

"So.....so....." the man could not find words to say and had turned round to go away.

She had called him back in a hushed voice. "I have caused you unrest because I am alone, is that it?"

"No, Prabha. I believe I have caused you unrest because I am alone."

"You are working for your own interest," she said, turning on him angrily.

"It is self-interest that keeps the world together, Prabha. Have you not read that in the Puranas?"

"Why do you distort the Puranas? Anyhow, I prefer self-denial and wish to keep aloof from the world."

"Then what about poor worldly people like me?" he asked.

"Self-denial and self-interest cannot go together, Vinay Babu."

"You may close your door against me, but I cannot renounce you."

"Renounce? You haven't got anything out of me, so what is there to renounce?" she asked.

She recalled that he had at first remained silent, and then said simply, "I wish to make the barren desert of your life bloom again, Prabha."

His words electrified her whole body.

The suppressed desires of her youth had welled up in her. She was afraid and she prayed to the gods for succour in her fight against *Kama*, the god of love and passion. Recovering herself she remon-

strated, "It does not behove you, Vinay Babu, to say such things to a widow. Why do you try to make me false to my dead husband?"

"Are fidelity and constancy to be enjoined on women only? I, as a widower, can remarry, but you cannot, why?" he asked.

"For heaven's sake go away. Our conversation may be overheard and draw someone here," she pleaded.

He quickly left. Feeling humiliated she went back to her bed. That night her thoughts went back to her husband, and she cried.

The night Vinay Kumar's question, "I can remarry, why not you?" kept assailing her. Feeling restless she got up and went to the door, her heart pounding. Slowly and quietly she unbolted the door and looked out, vainly hoping that Vinay Kumar might be there. Instead she saw the dog trying to get in. Greatly annoyed, she quickly shut the door and returned to her bed disappointed.

It was another cold night. Prabha and her son Chandru were eating their dinner in the kitchen. Normally Chandru never ate more than two *chapatis*, but since the dog came he had started demanding three. The mother considered this quite natural for a growing child. But when he asked for a fourth, Prabha checked him and said "You are still small, you must not over-eat." As Chandru left his seat to get a glass of water from a nearby jar, his mother's eyes fell on the dog sitting outside the kitchen door. The way it sat on its hind legs, looking up solemnly with a natural yellow Brahminical mark on his forehead (which she was noticing for the first time), it filled her with a strange and frightening thought. Perhaps.....perhaps.....her dead husband had been reborn assuming the form of this dog! A cold shiver ran through her body.

The next instant, she took a *chapati* and put it in the *thali* the dog had once defiled and which she had set aside without touching. The dog looked into the Brahmin's face and started eating. The Brahmin waited for it to finish, and then put it out and bolted the door.

In the middle of the night she woke up to the sound of thunder and rain. The window of her room rattled in the wind. The dim light of the lantern cast sombre and ghost-like shadows on the walls. Filled with fear she picked up the Gita and started reading it. Suddenly she heard the dog whining outside. A voice within her said, "Your husband is getting soaked in the rain." She hesitated, not knowing what

to do. The voice within her spoke again; "Even if it is not your husband, should you not show compassion to an animal on a night like this?" She made up her mind and went out of the room and let the dog in. She saw that it was wet and shivering. Wagging its tail, it ran straight into the room. Seeking a corner it huddled up and went to sleep. Prabha fetched a thick old sheet and threw it over the dog.

The next morning, on waking up the Brahminee looked for the dog, but he was not there. She searched for him in every part of the house, but it was nowhere to be found. The Brahminee was perplexed because the door was closed and the window barred. As she started rolling up her bed, she found the dog sleeping snugly under the quilt at the foot of the bed. She stood agape with surprise and fear. She was shocked that an unclean animal had shared her bed.

More and more she began to believe that her dead husband's spirit dwelt in the dog. Gradually the dog worked his way into her affections. It could now come inside the house any time, play with Chandru and was served food at each meal time.

Occasionally however, she would be assailed by doubts. Once she was listening to Chandru reciting a lesson which said that the dog was the most faithful friend of man. She reflected that perhaps that was the explanation of the dog's attachment to the house. Her belief now seemed to her a figment of her own imagination. Her eyes fell on the dog and she felt angry with herself for having fed and fattened it. She recalled what a nuisance it had been in the house. In a sudden fit of anger she picked up a heavy stick and hurled it at the dog. The dog was hit badly and ran out of the house yelping. The Brahminee now hoped that she was rid of the dog for good.

After *pūja* the next morning she, however, found the dog back in the house, sitting behind the devotees. She turned to Vinay Kumar and requested him to help her get rid of the dog by leaving it in some other place.

"You are asking me to commit the sin of making a poor animal homeless," Vinay Kumar remonstrated.

"Is it only my duty to look after it?", she queried.

"What about you? Why don't you keep it with you?"

"I live alone—who would look after it?" Vinay Kumar replied.

"All right, if you are fed up, I will go and leave the dog in some other part of the village." Vinay Kumar took the dog out with him.

As he abandoned the dog in a distant street, he felt far from happy. While returning he took a look back, and from the way the dog stared wretchedly at him, it seemed to Vinay Kumar that the dog knew that it was being cast out. At this, tears came to his eyes.

When Prabha saw Vinay Kumar returning without the dog, she heaved a sigh of relief. His past and present helpfulness filled Prabha with gratitude and she could not help feeling drawn towards him.

"Would you help me to tidy up the place, Vinay Kumar?" she asked.

A request of this kind indicating that he was no longer regarded as a stranger filled Vinay Kumar with great happiness.

"I can do a great deal to make your house look beautiful. Prabha" he said.

He brought the trunks down from the loft, dusted the cots, spread the beddings out in the sun to dry and fetched water from the well—exactly as he was directed by her.

While she was washing and scrubbing the floor, Vinay Kumar remarked. "I see a smile on your face after a long time." He added in jest, "I suppose it amuses you to make me work so hard."

He drew near and caught her by the wrists. "Look at me, Prabha" he said tenderly.

Tears fell from her eyes.

"What makes you cry, Prabha?" he asked showing concern.

In a low voice she replied, "Though a widow, I was quite contented recalling my past happiness. But the strange things you have been saying to me have taken away the peace of my mind. Please, Vinay Babu, do not call me by my name after this. It is better to keep some distance. Call me simply Brahminee. If not, any other name would do."

Her words on the contrary brought a gleam of hope in his eyes. Taking both her hands, he said, "Very well, I shall call you Kranti."*

Prabha shrank back in modesty, but Vinay Kumar came near and was about to kiss her when the Brahminee's son, Chandru, came in. She quickly drew back and started scrubbing the floor.

That evening she stood at the outer door looking out and indulging in sweet dreams. Suddenly, she saw the dog enter the house and

*Rebellion or revolution.

was shaken to her roots. She began to view the dog as she had done before. Then she said, "Oh, my husband, my venerated husband has returned. The lord of my life in this world and the next has come to keep watch over every thought and action of mine." Overpowered, she ran into the room and prostrated herself before the gods. She prayed for forgiveness and strength to overcome Desire. Wretchedly she sobbed as she begged for the boon of chastity. She remained in that posture for some time and only when the restlessness was cast from her mind and strength regained, she rose.

She improvised a small enclosure in the court-yard and put there a *thali*, a water bowl and an old blanket for the dog.

* * * *

"Why do you go on punishing yourself and me like this, Kranti?" Vinay Kumar said to her one day.

"I am a widow and beg of you not to visit this house again", she replied. "Consider the Brahminee to be no more."

"Why?" he asked greatly astonished.

"I am getting apprehensive. There is gossip enough already. The devotees are falling off because of our association. They also object to my keeping a dog."

Vinay Kumar laughed derisively and cried out: "These people are known to be drunkards and debauchees, gamblers and swindlers. These are the men who have forgotten what true religion is. Will you let such unrighteous and impious persons sit in judgment over us?"

"Not so loud, please," Prabha beseeched. "If anyone should overhear, my life would be made miserable."

"You drive me crazy, Kranti!" he exclaimed.

He went near her and pleaded, "Come away with me. You know I have a business in the town. Let us go and make our home there."

"Please do not say such things to me," she implored in a trembling voice. "In fact, you must stop coming here. Think that no one known to you lives here."

Vinay Kumar crumpled up. He took a deep sigh and went out. She watched him walk slowly away. Suddenly her eyes fell on the dog which was wagging its tail. She noticed that it had grown bigger. A new thought struck her. "Vinay Babu!" she called out after him softly. He came to a stop, turned round and asked, "What is it?"

"Please come back for a minute," she requested.

When he had approached, passionately she added, "Can you not take this dog away, and leave it in some far off place?"

"Certainly, if you so wish. I can take it away now."

"Er—no, not right away, please come back in an hour or so."

When Vinay Kumar returned, he found the dog being fed sumptuously.

When it had finished eating, she turned to Vinay Kumar, "Now you can take it away."

Vinay Kumar tied a length of chord round the dog's neck and led him out.

He trudged for a distance of three miles and reached the village of Khanpur. Outside the village stood a tree, to which he tied the dog. He went to the bazaar and bought some meat and a little fruit. Coming back, he placed the meat before the dog and waited. The dog lowered its head, sniffed but did not touch the meat, and instead glared at Vinay Kumar. Vinay Kumar waited for some time, then shrugging his shoulders he trundled off. He had not gone far when he looked back. The dog was in a rage. With nostrils distended, ears shot back, hind legs stretched to the utmost, the large grey eyes emitting hate, the whole body tense, the dog was tugging at the rope with all its might. It seemed to know that it was being abandoned there for ever.

Vinay Kumar walked on but he could not put out of his mind the fearful look on the dog's face. When he returned, he gave the fruit to Prabha, to be offered to the gods.

"Did you get rid of the dog?" the Brahminnee enquired anxiously.

"Yes. Now, I am sure it will not come back."

"Out" she exclaimed with relief. "Now I can live my life as before."

It was spring. The cool breezes and the colours of the season played havoc with Prabha's emotions. But when she looked at her own house, she saw mouldering walls, dull and drab, and doors and windows eaten up by white ants. She thought of the long-preserved religious books now almost crumbling to dust. The contrast between the freshness of nature renewing itself in spring time and the unchecked process of decay in her own house depressed her. She looked list-

lessly around and was distraught. She came to the door. Outside she saw a different world full of joy and excitement. She returned inside and asked her son to go and fetch Vinay Kumar. Even as she uttered the name of Vinay Kumar she felt a tingling sensation in her body. In the court-yard, her sari fluttered in the breeze, her hair blew about her face and as time passed her heart beat faster. When her son returned and said that Vinay Kumar's house was locked up she was sorely disappointed.

That night she did not feel in a mood to sit with Chandru and help him in reading the scriptures. Reading by himself he soon felt drowsy and dropped off to sleep. The smaller kid already had been put to bed. Only Prabha was awake. Vinay Kumar had just then returned from the town, his mind made up to leave the village for good, early next morning. He came straight to the Brahminee's house to say goodbye. He knocked at the door.

"Who is it?" she asked.

"Vinay Kumar", came the reply.

"Oh!"

She opened the door. "Come inside," she said. She closed the door but did not notice that the dog too had entered the house. The dog abandoned four days earlier at Khanpur had managed to return. It went and sat quietly in a corner of the verandah. Vinay Kumar informed the Brahminee of his decision to leave the village, "I thought I should come and say good-bye. If I have offended you in any way, at any time, please forgive me." As he turned to go, she said, "Can you not put off your departure by a few days?"

Vinay Kumar looked straight in her eyes. His lips quivered.

"Surely you do not want me to go on living like this, alone, and unhappy? I am only wasting my life here."

"Oh, Vinay Kumar!" There was tenderness and also anguish in her words.

Going behind him, she put her head on his shoulder. A thrill of pleasure ran through his body. He put his hand on her shoulder tenderly.

"What is it that you wish Kranti?" he asked.

"Vinay!" she said softly.

He was filled with happiness.

"What, then you will come away with me?"

"Yes.yes", she whispered.

Vinay Kumar burned with desire, the desire which he had repressed for years, the desire to touch Kranti's body all over. Now this desire coursed through every vein in his body. He felt like the surging sea whose mounting waves seek the shore endlessly because they could kiss it again and again. He took her in his arms and pressed her to himself. He felt her warm breath and heaving breasts. So completely was he under a spell at that moment that he could say nothing.

She too felt like one intoxicated. She had found release from the old inherited inhibitions, and was in ecstasy at the prospect of the new life that awaited her.

She lay down on a bed in the verandah, delirious with desire, her mouth half open and all her limbs relaxed. Her eyes closed as Vinay Kumar moved towards the bed.

Suddenly the fierce barking of the dog broke the delirium and Kranti sat up in fright and screamed. The dog sprang on Vinay Kumar and dug its teeth venomously into his left leg. Losing balance Vinay Kumar fell to the ground.

Prabha was stunned.

Recovering herself she got down from the bed. She shouted at the dog and helped Vinay Kumar to free his leg which the dog still held between its jaws.

Frustrated, hurt, Vinay Kumar aimed a savage kick at the dog's mouth but Prabha held him back. His bloodshot eyes saw the set warning look which had transformed her face. His arms fell back limp and inert.

A dead silence separated the two.

In a low trembling voice, she said, "I am in the grip of destiny, Vinay, some strange power rules over me, who knows but it is for my good. You see, Vinay Kumar, through what agents it works. I cannot defy it." "Kranti!" Vinay Kumar broke out, "You must not speak thus. Superstition grips you, Kranti, not destiny." He stretched his hand to touch her shoulder. The dog snarled. She gently edged away.

"Do not call me Kranti. Kranti is dead", she slowly breathed out the last word and moved back a little towards the wall.

Vinay Kumar was baffled and broken.

Limping and stumbling he approached the door and then turned to take a last said look at Prabha. He caught the steady stare of the dog's grey eyes. As he went out of the house, he muttered, "You had your revenge, damned dog, you blasted my life." He disappeared into the darkness of the night.

Prabha clung to the dog and cried.

(Translated by B. D. Mirchandani)

COUPLES

(Kalyan Advani)

1. *The company of the beloved was like moonlight,
And the fragrance of flowers, I was wrapped up in it.*
2. *In the company of the intoxicated, this truth was revealed to me,
That better is self-forgetfulness than self-awareness.*
3. *During a round of drinks among the toppers, the Saki* said to me,
"A spot of suffering is better than prayer."*
- 4-5. *One day, the Puritan said to one who was drunk,
"It will go hard with you on the Judgment Day."
With a smile on his lips said the intoxicated one, "This cup and
the beloved are going to commend me to God!"*
6. *The world, the wise ones say, is like the shadow of a tree,
Why the devil did we endure the terrible heat of the sun?*
7. *Sleep is transitory death, death is everlasting sleep,
At last we die, after acclimatising ourselves to sleep.*
8. *If no one had experience of sleep,
This world would never have been deemed a dream.*
9. *For those who died, life may well be called a dream,
Why will they worry about those they left behind?*
10. *Life is a dream, death is real,
How should we understand reality in a dream?*

(Translated by T. H. Advani)

*Cup-bearer in a tavern, metaphorically standing for the beloved.

NATHU AND HIS GOAT

(*Tirth Basant*)

NATHU is known to man, bird and beast in this locality. The man is a living magnet. All children are drawn to him, as also all the old and decrepit, from far and near. All animals too, without exception, seem to sense that Nathu is harmless, in fact a friend of theirs. That is why, without the least hesitation, and in his presence, they put their mouths to the *thali* of *mithai** that rests just outside his roadside shop. Sparrows of course have a God-given charter to peck at food anywhere they find it. But what of mice and rats? Nathu will not say 'No' to even these creatures of God. So, Nathu is a sort of father and mother to all living things in his neighbourhood.

He is about forty years old and has on top of his closely cropped head a nine-inch long tuft of hair, one of the old-fashioned marks of a Hindu, and this tuft hangs down the nape of his neck. His hair is dark, but his beard—he has it shaved once a week—has a sprinkling of grey and reminds one of a field bearing a wheat crop interspersed with patches of bright mustard flowers. The grey in his beard appears more marked by contrast with the moustache which, strangely enough, is all black. He is of average height, and in build it would not be odd to describe him as thin and lean as a stalk in a Rajasthani rice field. In appearance he is untidy, even dirty, as is obvious from his face and clothes which he washes with soap about once in a month.

Nathu came to this place four and a half years ago. The first eight months were spent by him just outside an abode serving free water to passers-by. Life in the open, combined with the sweet exhalations from the nearby neem tree blossoms, put some colour into his erstwhile pale face. The remaining three years and ten months he has spent in a six-by-eight foot cabin on a monthly rental of Rs. 7.50. Of course the original lessee of this cabin pays only Rs. 2.50 per month, but Nathu knows profiteering to be a common feature of life today and was quite content until the original lessee put forth a de-

*Sweets

mand for a still higher rent which Nathu stoutly refused to pay. Not that he would mind the additional burden of Rs. 2.50 per month since the cabin is well-situated. It is just that he is aroused by iniquity, will not knuckle down to injustice, as a matter of principle. And when he is aroused he allows his tongue free play against all the vices and villainies of modern life, but silence automatically descends on it, sooner or later, as ultimately it must. But there is one thing on his mind which he cannot forget.

It is this. Soon after setting up shop in his cabin, Nathu purchased a black she-goat for Rs. 18. This she-goat is now mother to four and grandmother to two she-goats. It is a small flock now, and though they yield him some milk, they are costly to maintain. Up to now, because of this herd, Nathu is out of pocket to the tune of Rs. 750. It is not that he regrets it; in his locality he has no other near or dear ones. That is why he even enjoys toiling for them. He does however, find it difficult to feed the goat's grand-kids but the alternative is to sell them off, and that would mean selling them for slaughter, and he does not want that sin on his head. So he has had their ears pricked with holes from which dangle small bells, and now he drives them out to the jungle to feed, and he knows that in the jungle, they can be grabbed by anyone wanting free meat to eat or sell. The grandma goat however has occupied a soft corner in his heart and what preys on his mind now is all connected with her.

About twenty yards from Nathu's *mithai* and *bajia** shop, in the same street, but on the side opposite, is the grain and *ghee* shop belonging to Jaspot. Jaspot is a man who believes in performing all the religious rituals in the morning so that he may be forgiven in advance for the sins he may have to commit unavoidably in the course of the day, as tradesman. He has a couple of cows which he lets loose during the day because a cow is a sacred animal and many Hindus would be only too eager to feed them with a baked *chapati*, a ball of dough or a few stalks of spiked green grass. The yield of milk which Jaspot gets from his cows thus comes to him free of cost. However, should some one else's cow stray and put her mouth to the pile of grain lying outside his shop during the day, he is quick to have

*Cooked vegetables

it clobbered and chased, though he knows that every cow is sacred to a Hindu, it is not a cow so much as mother-cow.

The trouble for poor Nathu arose one day when his she-goat, happening to pass by Jaspat's shop, considered the pile of wheat outside his shop an open invitation to fall to, crunch and despatch. Not that she could despatch more than a little, for she had hardly taken a few bites when Jaspat's eyes, busy for a while with his account book, fell on her and he yelled out to his assistant, "A million curses on your head, you scatter-brain. Are you blind? Can't you keep one eye on the job in hand and one on the pile of grain lying outside?"

Poor Gopu, the assistant, got the wind up. He had been busy trying to open a large new tin of ghee for a customer. Forthwith he left that job, grabbed a bamboo stick lying at hand, and chased the poor animal. The goat ran round Jaspat's shop and came back to the same spot, imagining no doubt that she was safe. But Gopu had now closed in and delivered a blow that brought the animal down breaking one of its legs. The attention of Nathu had been drawn by the shouts of Gopu in chase. He was busy frying *bajias* which sizzled and floated in the burning-hot oil, but that his black sweet-heart, the grandma she-goat should be laid low it was not to be thought of. *Bajias* were a small and secondary matter, so he had got up at once and rushed to her rescue as fast as he could, but it wasn't fast enough, because Nathu had only a leg and a half himself. The wail that he let out was so long and piteous that those who heard it were astonished. If the roof of his shop had fallen over him, or if he had been bludgeoned on his head by some one, he could not have shrieked as he did now. He put his arms round the goat's neck, lay down by its side on the road and cried loudly like a child. He called Gopu all manner of names and defiantly challenged him to a duel.

"If my goat ate your wheat, you could have asked me to pay for it you curmudgeon," he shouted. "What right had you to.....? Come out you rascal and fight it out with me."

Gopu is no child or weakling. He is heftily built, but he is after all only a servant in a petty shop, whereas Nathu is owner of one. It is not beyond Nathu's power to have a man like Gopu in his employ. This thought naturally restrained him and he kept inside his master's shop, making no reply. This was too much for Nathu who resented

being ignored and therefore shouted out louder challenges. A crowd gathered, and a crowd does not mind a bit of free fun. A number of chaps tried to incite Nathu further for they knew that he would not be able to stand up to a man of Gopu's heavy build and it would be a merry thing to watch him fight. But their wish was not fulfilled.

Nathu tried to get up and carry his goat to his shop, but the load proved too heavy for his weak leg. He lost his balance and fell to the ground, the goat almost on top of him. His pink turban rolled away a few feet, which was his greatest humiliation since the turban is a symbol of man's dignity, pride, prestige and what not. And Nathu's turban was indeed no ordinary turban, and he always took great care of it. It mattered not how dirty were the clothes he wore. The turban was always a bright pink. Not only that. The total length of material he bought for clothes to cover his body was seven yards. For this head-dress it had to be seventeen. Therefore, the fall of his turban was to him what the fall of his citadel in battle would be to a mediaeval king. The mishap meant disaster of the first magnitude, a humiliating blow to his pride and prestige. To the crowd, however, the spectacle provided rich fun. They laughed, and teased and ridiculed; they tried to put him on his mettle. In the end, the native instinct of fellow feeling prevailed and they carried both Nathu and his goat, and the turban, too, of course, to his shop, where the frying *bajias* had fried themselves to ashes.

Nathu did not have the heart for business that evening. He ate no food and lay down at night with the goat in his arms, his roll of bedding spread out on the ground in front of his shop. He lay sobbing most of the night.

Sorrow may come when it listeth, unaccountably. Not so Nathu's grief, for which he had cause enough. All his life he had been a lonely person. The goat had been his first and only companion—but what a companion! Human contacts could irritate him sometimes. But the poor dumb goat—never. He had become so fond of her, so attached to her that he did not mind it if she came and put her mouth to the food he was eating. The goat was a sort of mother to him because she gave him milk for his tea, milk for his ghee which he ate with bread and jaggery, as advised by an indigenous medico. The goat was in a sense his wife too, for when he felt the need of affection, he would put

his arms round her neck and fondle her. Then when the goat strayed to the huge metal dish holding *mithai* for sale, and put her mouth to it, he felt as if a daughter of his had done it and it made him happy. In short she was for him the nucleus of all human relationships, his centre of gravity.

The situation already grave for him has, during the two or three months since the calamity that befell the goat, become more grave by the appearance of a young woman on the scene. The more he ponders over it, the more is his confusion. Very much against his wish, this young woman is trying to gain control over his affections and his shop. She is a fair looking and attractive young woman, well-built and some what taller than Nathu. She lost her husband twenty years ago when she was barely sixteen, and then she found herself deprived of all her gold ornaments by her husband's relations and turned out of doors. She had sought refuge with her father and mother, but they also died in course of time. Not having a brother or sister, she started living alone and worked for her living. At thirty-six she is in the full bloom of her youth. When she walks about with *kajal** in her eyes, a bare midriff and a bodice worn tightly over breasts that have never suckled a babe, she draws every young and old man's eye to herself, particularly on the spot where the breasts are thrust forward like two Alfonso mangoes. She is a very hardy and hard working woman. People have seen her carry on her head one huge water-filled vessel over another, and one more held on her hip with her arm, her back straight and head held high. They have known her to winnow the corn or card and clean cotton all day long without showing signs of fatigue. What is more, they believe her to be a chaste woman despite her strong, fine body. On that account, no miscreant, no devil in human form, dare accost and make advances to her while she goes about, performing sundry jobs.

Now however, being constantly pestered by an old man, she seeks protection in marriage which will also mean companionship and escape from boredom. That is why, she keeps visiting Nathu's shop, with or without pretext, for marriage alliance with Nathu would bring to her, in addition, relief from hard work every day. As a married woman, she would be welcome in many homes too. And if per chance she

*a beauty aid to the eyes

should be blessed with a baby, her state of womanhood would find fulfilment and completion. So she comes to Nathu's shop and tries to lend a helping hand, turning over *jalebis* sweetening in the syrup. In a subtle way, by so doing, she possibly tries to convey to the fat-head Nathu that a man too, going through the frying process of celibacy must dip himself in the sweet syrup of woman's love, otherwise he will remain hard and dry and tasteless like fried but unsweetened *jalebis*.

Nathu understands everything, and he has not been averse to making casual and quiet enquiries about this woman to find out her background. But the poor fellow is also aware of his own weak constitution and therefore afraid that marriage with this woman would spell disaster for him. The recipe of the medico referred to above and tried by Nathu for some time has wrought no perceptible change in him but he has faith in the medico and so he thinks he is feeling better. If his blind faith should, in defiance of principles of logic and commonsense, put vitality into his weak bones and muscles, all would be well. But for the time being all his affection is centred on the goat and he does not appear to miss human company, let alone the company of a woman. He is therefore not only indifferent to the young woman Champa but goes out of his way to indicate to her by an incessant display of affection for his goat that he has no room in his heart for any other creature.

Champa is puzzled by such excessive and exclusive display of affection by a man for a mere animal. How is it possible, she asks herself, but finds no answer. She gets dizzy thinking over it, but it puts her on her mettle all the more, and she pursues him relentlessly in the conviction that victory will be hers one day.

She argues that the goat is bound to die sooner or later, as a goat's life is relatively very much shorter than a man's or, Nathu is bound to get tired of nursing his goat, and give it up.

But however sound her reasoning, she forgets that truth is not one-sided or single-faced. The mind of man probes and explores within its own limitations and therefore the grasp of the whole truth is beyond any man. Take the instance of Champa who did not consider the fact that Nathu was lame and lame from childhood as a result of an accident. He had walked with a limp all his life and, as a consequence, now there was established a greater bond between the lame Nathu and his lame she-goat. He saw himself and her as two un-

fortunates in the same boat, and his former simple attachment to her was now combined with deep sympathy. He was therefore determined to keep faith with her to the end. He argued that if he as an unfortunate could not take care of the poor goat, no one else would. Therefore, he neglected even his shop and spent most of his time nursing the goat. He forgot to renovate even his turban so that everyone who saw him was astonished. Some ridiculed him, but a few thought him the very soul of compassion and spoke highly of him.

Two weeks passed in this manner. One day suddenly a thought came to Champa: why not go and help Nathu in nursing the goat, and so relieve him somewhat? They say that a woman's intuition seldom misses its mark. From that day on Champa has been working strenuously for the recovery of the goat. At first Nathu would not let her go near the goat, but when he saw that she loved her sincerely and was making even independent enquiries, here and there, to find out some specific that would put the goat on her feet again, he relented, and now he is back at the shop, and Champa is in charge of the goat.

That has been the situation for the last ten days. But during this short period, a great change has come over Nathu. When he sees Champa massaging the goat's leg, his eye travels also to Champa's bright and attractive face. He speaks to her sweetly which he did not do before. It is obvious that he now feels a strange stirring in his heart, as obvious as are the first rays of the rising sun.

Who can say then that the goat may not prove to be the cause of a union between the two? Who can say that the untouched Nathu will remain untouched always? Who can say?

(Translated by T. H. Advani)

MOTHER AND SON

(Sugan Ahuja)

*HAVING received a spanking from his mother the son sat howling in
a corner,*

*I reprimanded the wife and I tried to pick him up and comfort him;
His response to the affection was that he bit my hand,
Freed himself and went back to the same spot, crying.*

*She could not bear his behaviour of disrespect to me;
By anger roused, she flew at him again;
When I tried to restrain her, she went for me,
The boy full of fear looked on in silence.*

*Late that night we slept separately all of us,
At midnight I was awakened by a sound and saw,
The Boy clinging to his mother in bed,
The mother with a sob pressing him to her bosom.
I felt that mother and son formed a sovereign world apart,
No third person to penetrate therein and be admitted.*

(Translated by T. H. Advani)

HE COULD NOT FIGURE IT OUT

(G. Dudani)

"I AM a living example of all-round and complete failure. Whatever I have touched has turned to dust. At every step in my life punishment and defeat have been my lot. In fact, it could be said that my life has been a tale of retrograde progression. I have advanced only from one set-back to another."

"You have said so much without telling me in what ways. Any instances?" I remarked, ordering two cups of tea.

We were sitting at a table in a restaurant.

"Instances? Hundreds. From my daily life, over a period of years, boss! Whatever the intent of my actions the reverse happened every time. As a consequence, no one now has any faith in me. They know in advance that I am dogged by ill-luck and bound to fail."

"You haven't given an example yet," I said with some irritation.

"Examples? Hundreds from daily life, for years and years. To such an extent am I pursued by the devil of defeat that even my intimate friend Nathuram has ceased to believe that I can succeed in anything. Nathuram is a local resident of this place and not a migrant from Pakistan. He has been my friend ever since I came here. He has encouraged me in every new venture and always given me good advice. Even he has now come to the conclusion that I will never make good. Friends and relatives, one and all, are now bereft of hope for me."

"What, even your relatives?" I asked, hoping it might bring him to the point.

"Yes, one and all. And I don't blame them. After Partition my brothers managed to get jobs, some here, some elsewhere. God knows where they are now. All of them took loans time and again to put me on my feet. In appreciation I transferred my evacuee property claims to them. Vast agricultural lands we had! I had many brothers, all willing to help, so I did not worry and made over my claims to

them. But really what should the poor fellows do? Look after their own families or look after mine? You be the judge, boss, you are a man of wisdom."

"I suppose you are right. So now? They won't look at you any more?" I asked.

"Look at me? I don't know where they are and how they fare. But I was telling you about my persistent failure in life. My brothers were convinced that I could never succeed, and in the past they often wrote to me to that effect. They are absolutely right. I share their conviction. It is the same at home, boss. I mean my wife. When I threaten to run away, she says if I do, I will receive hard knocks and come back very soon, sorry and humiliated. What an insult!"

"That's bad. She shouldn't speak like that. But....."

"My wife is gross, insensible, stupid. At home they call her Fat-head. Nothing affects her—no physical burden or blow; no crisis or calamity. Even in sickness she is like an animal. Hard words or taunts do not hurt her. She has simply no feelings. Even such a person is convinced that I can never succeed. And when I threaten to run away she is unafraid, unaffected. Listen to this....."

He came out with a sample of conversation with his wife. "Many a time I have threatened and said: 'Shami, one of these days I am going to run away. I am fed up.' She says: 'You will run away? Where will you run away? You will receive some more knocks and come back!' That is what she says. Did you hear, boss? 'Woman, don't say that; don't make me angry', I tell her, because I might do it. You heard me, boss?"

"And what does she say?"

"She? She says: 'When do you propose to go? Do tell me in advance so that I may make some arrangement for my livelihood'. I tell her: 'You be sure I will not do that. I shall disappear suddenly.' And she says: 'Oh! then midnight would be the best time!' That's the kind of talk between us sometimes."

"Anyone else at home?" I enquired.

"My daughter Laji. May she live long! Before her there were three miscarriages. The next child was with us for a few days only, almost like a guest. That was the time when my wife got the nickname of Fat-head, and not without reason, either. After conception

she would feel very sick. But what do you think she did for a remedy? She would vomit and eat something forthwith; vomit and eat, vomit and eat. Whatever came her way she would shove into her mouth—without thinking of the consequence. She is that insensate. Once she crossed the limit. It happened before Partition, and she was in her second or third month of pregnancy. She was feeling sick. The only thing at hand was a banana. She ate it up forthwith. After a while she was sick again. You know what she did then? She shoved the banana skin into her mouth, chewed it for a while, swallowed as much of it as she could and spat out the rest. Family folk and others were all aghast! There is no accounting for it, boss. It must be some spirit possessing her."

"So that's how she came to be called Fat-head?" I said to show I was listening though by now I too had lost the thread of the story in the interest aroused by the strange character of his wife!

"Oh, no!" he explained. "These were only brief flashes. Listen to what follows. I told you, didn't I, about the kid who died? He had an unusually flat nose and a hare-lip. Whenever she suckled him, the milk would flow out of his nose. We were all filled with anxiety. But this woman? She would look at the child and break into peals of laughter. She would ask my mother if it was really hers, or we were playing a practical joke on her! She would turn to me and say, 'perhaps a municipal road roller had passed over the child's nose'. I was dumb-founded!"

Suddenly he fell into a deep silence. He seemed dumb-founded, even now. The spring of his words had dried up. He seemed lost in the past. I had to do something about it and recall him to the present. I found his story one of absorbing interest and wanted to hear it to the end.

"What happened then?" I asked, shaking him by his arm.

"What could happen? Nothing, absolutely nothing, boss. She remained a gross thing, never changed. In fact, became worse and worse as time passed. She would say laughing that the kid should be in a museum! 'In at the mouth, out at the nose—what magic! Do take him to the museum and leave him there. It would be good fun for young and old, they would enjoy the sight!' Fortunately the child died. My mother was in loud lamentation, but this woman ate some

HOW CAN I LIGHT THE LAMP

(Ishwar 'Anchal')

I THOUGHT Divali would come and spread happiness everywhere,
The gates of happiness would open and none would be without joy,
Every one would sway in merriment and mirth,
Sorrow would vanish and joy would enter all homes,
And echoes of songs would be ringing in the whole universe.
Gardens would spread every where, flowers of hope would blossom,
Every branch would swing rhythmically, wearing a necklace of lamps
Red dawn would spread over the earth,
Deep darkness would be wiped out,
The phase of autumn would depart and barrenness turn to bloom.
Clad in many-coloured saris of the red lines of the dawn,
Queens of the desert and of palaces would look bright and charming.
Gifts of love would they offer,
None would be left lonely;
The clustering lamps, Sweetheart, would make the world refulgent.
But now that Divali has come, happiness is nowhere, spread.
The gates of happiness would open and none would be without joy,
Lamps are extinguished and flowers faded,
Musical instruments at the party are dumb,
Sorrow has throttled my emotions, how can I sing happy songs?
Sweetheart, tell me, how can I light the lamp?
The garden of hope is destroyed, flowers have fallen into the dust,
The firmament weeps in the night of sorrow, every branch is shedding
tears.
How can I sing songs of joy?
And how can I forget my grief?
My grief over which others are crying, how can I forget them myself?
Sweetheart, tell me, how can I light the lamp?*

*Divali is the Hindu festival of lamps that marks the end of autumn. It is a festival of joy and thanks-giving for the earth's bounty. But for the Sindhi poet uprooted from the land of his birth by the partition of India, it evokes painful memories more than joy.

you do? Someone comes to meet you and you offer him a cup of tea, don't you? You don't ask for payment, do you? My forefathers never did such a thing—how could I do otherwise?"

I was flabbergasted. I had no answer. He had certainly something there from his own angle. I thought, however, that the same could not possibly apply to every trade, so I asked him to tell me the story of his cycle-hire business.

"I'll tell you," he said. "Small children would come, such dear little children, and they would entreat: 'Please, Lakha Dada,* can I have a cycle to ride for a while? Please, Lakha Dada!' Well, who am I to refuse such a request from sweet little children? Boss, if a fellow came to me and begged for a limb of my body, I would not say 'No' to him. These kids begged only for cycles—such a small matter! Were we not children once? Were we denied anything?... Now, about my sweets shop. Little girls would come and say in such an irresistible manner: 'Lakha Dada, may I have a sweet?' I ask you, boss, aren't children like flowers? Could I possibly send them away empty-handed? Now you be the judge."

The man's sincerity was beyond question. His face seemed lit up as he spoke. Again, I was disconcerted.

"Then a princely heart has been your undoing, shall we say?" I ventured to ask, since I thought I had got at the root of the matter.

"What! call this small thing princely? A princely heart gives unasked, boss. This—this—is nothing. This, I would say, is simply being human." He seemed hurt by my remark. To pacify him I said "I am sorry you misunderstood me. I had in mind the keeping of accounts."

"Accounts!" he laughed. "Boss, accounts are meant to be kept by clerks. Did I ever keep accounts before I came here that I should keep them now? Accounts and account books! Ha, ha!"

He had a fit of laughter. When he got over it, he continued, "You know, boss, why I left school? Because of arithmetic."

He was in a daze, as if the past was swimming before him.

I tried to recall him. "Don't mind my telling you, but no business can be run without accounts," I said gently.

"Boss, that is a disease which I seem unable to catch," he said

*Term of respect meaning "elder brother"

DESERT BLOOMS

simply. "That may be the reason of my failures. How can I learn to keep accounts at this age?"

"Why don't you try for a job?"

"Boss, do you think I have not tried? I just don't succeed even there. At first they ask: Which college were you in? I reply, I never went to any college. They tell me I should, in that case, look for a peon's post. But even for a peon's post applicants today are matriculates. Who will engage me as a peon, when I studied in school up to the third standard only, and those standards were not passed yearly either!"

"What about petty, casual labour, odd jobs and so on?" I enquired, sipping the remains of my tea, cold as it was.

He did not reply. His face clouded. He seemed to feel terribly hurt and humiliated and two or three times he made an effort to say something but swallowed the words. At last he murmured, "You mean, work as a coolie?" It was obvious he considered such work below his dignity.

"Yes", I said gently, "there is nothing degrading about honest labour. On the contrary....."

I stopped abruptly, for I saw tears in his eyes. He buried his head between his arms, and rested it on the table. He was crying. Suddenly he got up, shook his head and walked out.

(Translated by T. H. Advani)

HOW CAN I LIGHT THE LAMP

(Ishwar 'Anchal')

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*The Princesses of my dreams with whom I played in my sleep,
All those queens were devoured when the demon of reality came,
When I woke from my slumber there appeared
Naked women with their nude bellies.*

*When the world of my dreams is shattered, how can I re-create those
dreams?*

Sweetheart, tell me, how can I light the lamp?

*You will be living on false hopes, you will be deceiving yourself!
Today, at the feet of the goddess you will have to light lamps of blood!
Who can be as unwise as you?*

Labour is the decree of fate today.

*Labour is the decree of my fate, but how shall I explain it to you?
Sweetheart, tell me, how can I light the lamp?*

*How can the goddess appear in poverty, how can she be pleased with-
out wealth?*

She who is the queen of palaces, how can she grant her vision to a
poor man?*

Why should I be a fool to make such vain attempts?

Why should I entertain such false hopes?

*From such a useless hope, Sweetheart, how can I derive the zest of
life?*

Sweetheart, tell me, how can I light the lamp?

*But if you arise, the world will bow, even fate can be moulded by
action,*

*Even in a desolate garden, Sweetheart, spring can be restored by
labour.*

The phase of autumn will pass by,

The aspect of the world will change,

*The aspect of the world will change, and I am longing for such a
moment.*

But Sweetheart, tell me, how can I light the lamp till then?

(Translated by M. U. Malkani)

*Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth

DESPAIR

(Anand Golani)

THE child was crying. Its screams began to fill her ears. For a while she let the child yell, but steadily the screaming grew worse and reached a point of frenzy that became too much to bear. Reluctantly she gave up rolling the *Chapatis* and came and stood near the crib. The four-month old baby looked at her and calmed down.

"Why should such people have children", she murmured to herself, "if they must leave them like this, while they go about with their husbands enjoying themselves at cinema shows and friends' houses? Now what am I to do, attend to this child or cook dinner for her majesty?"

"So you are hungry, are you?" she asked. She picked up the child and again murmured to herself, now quite angry, "These modern mothers, they must need run around first, having a good time before it will occur to them to look after their children.....here put the finger in your mouth."

The child soon got tired of sucking at the fingers. Resting her tiny head against her shoulders, the little one kept her eyes wide open. She tried to rock her gently. "Can't you sleep?" Then, staring at those wide-open eyes she said, "Look, if you don't go to sleep. I will simply throw you back in your crib."

The child began to suck at her shoulder. A shiver passed through her body. Angrily she threw the child back into the crib and rushed into the kitchen, her hands trembling as she rolled the *chapatis*. The child's crying now really began to annoy her, while through the half open door of the neighbours' house, she could hear someone complaining:

"Dear, must you bother me now?"

"Come, darling, your son is crying for you. Give him his feed."

"I know who made him cry."

"Believe me, dear, I did not do anything to him. I simply patted his cheek with my finger and he burst into tears. Now he will not quieten down."

"If you tease the child, it is you who should quieten him."

"I tell you, I am unable to calm him. Please, I beg of you, give him his feed, put him to sleep. I am going crazy."

"Let him cry. By and by he will sob himself into sleep."

"Let him cry! Now what kind of a mother are you!"

"Well, what do our neighbours do?" retorted the woman. "They put their child to bed and go out and have a pleasant time. The child wakes up, it cries itself again to sleep. But you must make my life hell."

"Our neighbour has a widowed sister who is both a maid-servant and an *ayah*. You must do your work yourself, don't you see?"

Listening to this conversation of her neighbours, she wanted to fling an abusive word at them, but her mouth could not utter it, for her heart told her that they had described her rightly. She was an *ayah*, was she not, and a maid-servant as well.

Would any mother allow her own flesh and blood to cry like that? Baking the *chapatis* she trembled at the sound of the little one's sobs.

"O Asha*," came a woman's voice from the neighbouring house, "Baby is crying too much now."

"But what can I do? I've tried to quieten her but she is hungry. I can do nothing about that."

"Bring the baby to me", replied the neighbour.

She picked up the child who began to suck at her shoulder again, making her feel as if someone caressed it, someone in a dream, fondling her with gentle hands on her shoulder, murmuring "Asha. Why don't you smile?"

"One must not smile all the time and too much," replied Asha.

"What else have you, Asha, beside the smile?" said he, of the gentle hands. "I have gone to the ends of the earth looking for you and I have found you. Without that smile, Asha, you are not Asha; you are Nirasha, you are not hope, you are hopelessness, despair. You may not be pretty, but you have your smile. Whenever you smile your face shines with a strange beauty. Keep smiling and let me gaze at you....."

*Name, meaning 'Hope'

"Oh! Asha, what are you thinking of?" cried the neighbour. "The baby will shrivel away crying like this. Look at her eyes. That's not right, Asha!"

Asha placed the child in the neighbour's lap and murmured, "How shall I tell them that?"

"Bless you, my little one!" cried the neighbour, preparing herself to feed the child. "She has been sucking your shoulder, hasn't she?"

"Yes," said Asha and suddenly blushed like a bride.

The neighbour suckled the baby and soon she was asleep. Asha stumbled back into her kitchen. Someone was again whispering into her ears: "Asha, you are nothing without your smile."

Asha put her hands over her ears. Pressing them down with her fingers, she whispered, "Don't, don't come to me. You are gone, you know you're gone for ever. If you must come, let not your voice alone come; you come, the whole of you come."

She felt as if someone stood beside her, but as she turned her head to look at him, he had vanished. She tried to remove the hand that cupped her chin, but the invisible hand would not let go of her, and the honey-sweet voice said, "Won't you smile?"

She rubbed her chin fiercely, but now his hands were in her hair, soft fingers sifting and caressing her tresses, and again she heard the voice saying, "Hide me in your hair, Asha."

Asha opened out her hair and said, "For God's sake, go away. What do you gain by torturing me?"

She threw a *chapati* on the hot pan and began to remonstrate to the voice, "You abandoned me, not? Did it ever occur to you that I might never again smile? You knew that I was nothing without that smile and yet you took it away—Couldn't you have left me my smile, at least? What right had you over my smile?"

"Asha", said the neighbour, sitting down near the kitchen, "With whom are you talking? You are well, aren't you?"

"I am talking to the wall", replied Asha, "don't you know how to talk to the wall?"

"Good God!" exclaimed the neighbour, startled, "Have you gone crazy, girl?"

Asha burst into a laugh and began to recite a crazy-girl rhyme.

Years back, Asha had likewise burst into laughter, when someone had uttered that same crazy-girl rhyme.

She had been going upstairs and he was coming down reciting that rhyme. At the sound of her laughter he had taken fright and had tried to run. But she had caught him and taking him by the nose she had retaliated by reciting a thief-boy rhyme. Ruefully rubbing his nose, the fellow had vanished. But after a few days, coming down the stairs, he had accosted her and asked, "Why did you pull my nose?"

"Why did you call me crazy girl?" replied Asha promptly.

"Answer my question and I will tell you."

"Why did you call me crazy girl? I did not retaliate simply by pulling your nose, I called you a thief as well, didn't I? Now if you answer my question I will answer yours."

"Crazy girl makes boys go crazy about her."

"Thief-boy turns girls into thieves as well."

"Excellent", the fellow had said, "and that's exactly what I want....."

The neighbour burst in upon Asha's dream-world.

"May I ask you a question, Asha?"

"No!" cried out Asha, "you know that I am dying within myself and yet you ask, 'Asha what is the matter with you, why are you dying'? You know I am sick, sick, do you hear me, and yet you will ask: 'Are you well, Asha?'"

The neighbour heard Asha catch on a sob and run out of the kitchen.

Asha stood over the child, who, sleeping in the crib dreamt her little dreams. She watched the child now pucker up her lips as if she would burst into weeping, now spread them into a laugh. Once she too used to laugh in her sleep, and someone would put his finger on her lips, and were she to wake up with a gasp, he would cover her lips with his, and she would cling to his breast.

Asha put a trembling finger on the smiling lips of the baby. At the sudden touch, the child burst into tears. Asha began to kiss her.

The sobbing child clung to her breast and lay there exhausted. Asha kept hugging and kissing the child. Slowly the child put her lips to

Asha's breast. Asha wished that the child should go on sucking and she kissing her.

Suddenly, someone came into the room. It was Asha's sister-in-law. There was surprise and shock written in her voice as she exclaimed, "Whatever are you doing, Asha? Are you feeding the child?"

QUATRAINS

(Lekhraj "Aziz")

1. *AMONG musical instruments there is none that will match that of
Silence,
Silence, by its eloquence, fathoms the heart of Mystery;
The one melody of Silence surpasses all the sound-melodies put to-
gether—
What a sound is Silence—a soundless sound!*
2. *Wisdom that will not mutely suffer a wrong is useless,
Knowledge that will not help to see clearly is useless;
The mind that wanders, wanders, is worse than the state of idiocy,
That which cannot take us to the destination is useless.*
3. *None ever understood the riddle of life—
We barely rise up when death descends;
None by wisdom solved the mystery of this phenomenon—
Is it a dream? is it illusion? or is it a third thing altogether?*
4. *Who has not gladly swallowed the lie that is life?
The foolish and the wise alike get ensnared willingly,
To be in the world of emotion and not commit sin?
Come, point him out to me and him who did not hug sin to his heart.*

(Translated by T. H. Advani)

THE LIGHT WENT OUT

(*Harikant*)

“COME on, boy!”

The tongawalla addressed his jaded horse as he bent forward to give it a pat before jerking at the reins. The horse lugged the vehicle forward and fell into a clumsy trot.

Jiwan had waited with his hackney tonga for the last train to arrive and now it was ten in the night. He had not found a fare and, greatly disappointed, was returning home. After a whole day's effort, he had earned just one and a quarter rupee and that too with difficulty. With that small amount he had to feed six mouths and his dumb friend, the horse.

From early morning Jiwan would ply his vehicle in the town, visiting every part of it, calling out for passengers, but few would get into his tonga. For Jiwan the reason was not far to seek. He would contemplate the tonga's ramshackle condition with gloom. A rickety carriage, torn and dirty cushions, an ill-fed, bony animal with a slow and clumsy pace that made the tonga lurch uncomfortably from side to side—this he knew to be the cause of his small earnings. He had often wished to renovate the tonga, but somehow always lacked the means.

Leaving behind the tall buildings, congested bazaars and metalled roads of the town, he turned his tonga into an unmetalled road leading to his village.

Suddenly the tonga's only light began to flicker. Nervously, Jiwan looked at the dying light. He whipped the horse to make it go faster. And the sudden rush of air snuffed it out. The next second there was the sharp sound of a whistle from behind. Jiwan knew it was the policeman's and what he was in for. Fear seized him, and his trembling hand travelled involuntarily to his waist, where his small earnings were tucked away inside a fold over the pyjama string. His weak, bony fingers clutched at the nickel and copper coins, sensing that he would have to part with them. With eyes full of dread, he looked behind. In the dim light of the street lamp he saw a policeman, dressed in a

bright buttoned uniform, walking towards him with the gait of authority. Jiwan's heart stopped within him. He pulled up the tonga by the side of the road.

"Salaam, huzoor*," said Jiwan, saluting the policeman in meek servility as the latter approached. "Can I take you anywhere?"

"You cunning rascal! Yes, let us go to the Police Station. Why is your tonga without a light?" demanded the policeman severely.

"Light?.....the light went out just now, huzoor," answered Jiwan humbly, climbing down from the tonga.

"And why did it go out?" the policeman barked.

Why, Why, Why—the word beat at Jiwan's head like a hammer.

After a moment's silence, Jiwan replied, "Your honour, there was no oil left in the lamp."

"No oil left, hey?" derisively asked the policeman. "What kind of a reply is that, you scoundrel? Why don't you fellows mind your lamps?"

Jiwan was in anguish. Pathetically he replied, "Sarkar**, to keep the flame of life burning in our bodies, we poor people have to use our blood as oil. We toil and sweat. Still the lamp of our destiny keeps flickering. How can we always think of the tonga light?"

The policeman was momentarily silenced.

Jiwan looked at him with a tearful appeal in his eyes, "My children must be crying with hunger even as I talk to you, Sarkar. They have not tasted food since last night. My little one Ramu must be crying for milk. Please have pity."

Jiwan's throat was hoarse with misery. The story of his poverty moved the policeman and for a moment there was a great struggle within him. In the helpless situation of Jiwan, he saw his own reflected vividly. He too had to look after a family of six on a pittance of seventy rupees a month. His children never had enough food. He saw his youngest daughter Uma's rosy lips shrink and slowly fade, like a flower in autumn. The sight would bring a pang to his heart. That morning Uma had suddenly developed high fever and he had to look on helplessly for want of money. The whole day his mind had dwelt on his child. Life seemed to him a monstrously heavy burden. At the end

*A respectful mode of address by an inferior to a superior

**Literally "government"; sometimes addressed to a person in authority

of the day, fatigued by work, he was about to go back home empty-handed. Just then he had noticed the light of Jiwan's tonga go out. It kindled hope in him. For a vehicle to be without a light after dark was against regulations. Policeman Behari decided to exploit the situation fully. He needed money desperately to buy medicine for his daughter. He had to have it anyhow, by fair means or foul. And here was a God-sent opportunity.

"Whom are you trying to bamboozle, you rogue?" bellowed the policeman. "You tongawallas are in the habit of plying your vehicles without lights. You do it on purpose, because you save money on oil."

"Huzoor," Jiwan entreated.

"I am not going to let you off. I will take you to the Police Station and have you fined ten rupees. That will teach you a lesson, you scoundrel! Come on, off we go."

Jiwan's heart was now heavy with fear. He removed his torn cap from his head and placed it at Behari's feet in supplication. "Sarkar, I am utterly destitute—Sarkar! Pardon me this time", he said.

Behari wavered. He felt sorry for the old man. But he too needed money and the only way to get it was by a show of harshness and authority. He simulated anger and said sharply, "I have heard that kind of talk before. I am concerned with your offence only. I am going to have you challaned."

Jiwan entreated again, but Behari had steeled himself for the sake of his daughter. Failing in his appeal, Jiwan brought out his day's earnings with a shaking hand. He took a last look at the coins, and proffered them to the policeman and in a broken voice said simply, "A whole day's earnings."

Behari looked round to make sure that there was no one around and took the money.

"Well, don't do it again," he said with a last show of authority and strode off.

Jiwan was now like one looted. In great misery, he mounted his tonga which now moved off slowly.

In the black night stretching out before him he saw the utter darkness of his own existence.

What was he to give to his hungry children at home? His wife too would be waiting for him in expectation.

As he built up these pictures in his mind, tears welled up in his eyes.

Behari, the policeman, beamed at his success as he saw the coins gleam in his hand. But the very next moment, the sound of the wheels moving away in the opposite direction sent a shiver through him. The screeching and groaning of the wheels sounded to his ears like a plaintive cry of Jiwan's guiltless poverty. His conscience started pricking him. What a wicked thing he had done this day? But he thought of his own helpless situation again. He tried to reason with his conscience. Was not his little daughter ill? Did she not require medicine for which he had no money? He quickened his pace as the face of his ailing daughter appeared before his mind's eye.

As he neared his home, Behari found the burden of his thoughts unbearable. He stepped inside his house. His daughter lay on a hard wooden bed. There was perspiration on her face. He put his hand on her forehead. His wife informed him that the girl's fever had abated. The women next door had owed her money for a sewing job. With it she had purchased medicine for the child.

Behari heaved a sigh of relief. He took the money out of his pocket and put it on the table where burned a hurricane lantern. The metal coins shone in the light of the lantern. Behari could not take his eyes off them. In a short while the coins seemed to him unusually bright—so bright that now he was unable to look at them. He closed his eyes. His conscience had reasserted itself. It seemed to say, "To save your own child you have starved the children of another poor man."

The image of Jiwan's sad old face rose before him. His words kept ringing in his ears:

"The light went out.....There is no oil left.....The flame of our lives.....Blood and sweat.....Pardon me, Sarkar....."

His nerves became taut, his breath came faster. When the light of Jiwan's tonga went out, his own hope had kindled. He had pushed Jiwan further into the darkness of life in order to bring light into his own. "No, no!" he said between his teeth. Suddenly, he picked up the money from the table and rushed out. His wife looked up in astonishment.

Entering the village, he found Jiwan's mud hut. As he approached it he saw a man squatting on the ground, with his head between his knees, obviously crying. From inside the hut came the sobbing of a child.

Softly he came near the old man, and put the coins at his feet. At the sound of the coins, Jiwan raised his head. His eyes opened wide. Seeing the policeman, he stood up respectfully and said: "Salaam, Sarkar!"

Behari could not say anything. He had tears in his eyes. He turned and slowly walked away.

(Translated by T. H. Advani)

THE POOR MAN'S HUT

(Kishinchand 'Bewas')

1. *A PROPERTY that is free from the evils of inheritance,
That is not burdened with the fear of mortgage,
That causes no anxiety of danger or destruction,
That sits light on the mind and is easy to maintain,
Wherein pride of pelf can find no entrance—
O God, may no harm befall the poor man's hut!*
2. *That shuns everything showy and flimsy,
That is free from the envy of high living,
That is protected from the jealous and the covetous.
That has no fear of the villain or the murderer,
That is a casket which needs no lock and key—
O God, may no harm befall the poor man's hut!*
3. *From old thatch they made its simple roof,
For support they trimmed a hundred branches of trees,
With reeds and weeds they built that shelter,
The inmates laboured and their relatives and friends,
Sturdy men gathered to lend a helping hand—
O God, may no harm befall the poor man's hut!*
4. *No architect is proud of planning it,
No mason, carpenter, blacksmith worked on it,
No mortar, or stone, or brick burdens it,
That has no worry of paying any property tax.
That is free of rent, and is no market stall—
O God, may no harm befall the poor man's hut!*
5. *Through whose chinks the sun and the moon are peeping,
Through which rays from the starry spheres slide down,
Through whose walls the whispering winds come rustling,
Through whose roof the rain besprinkles the floor.
A health-giving gift, perfected by Nature—
O God, may no harm befall the poor man's hut!*

6. *Where the sweet loaf of jowar* is highly relished,
Where simple living drives you not to the doctor's door,
Where honest labour makes your life-span longer,
Where avarice does not overpower happiness,
Where the spark of grief does not burn you up—
O God, may no harm befall the poor man's hut!*

(Translated by M. U. Malkani)

*Millet, the poor man's food in Sind

BROTHER ABDUL RAHMAN

(*Amarlal Hingorani*)

SOME thought him daft, others considered him a dervish, a wandering fakir, God-intoxicated. He may have been both. In appearance he was lean, rather tall, and wheat-complexioned. His body was not altogether bare, and he went about loosely wrapped in an old quilt. He seemed always in a state of spiritual animation. He visited all manner of places of worship, no matter what their religious denomination; mosque and shrine alike were houses of God, and he was seen frequenting both. On the wharf at Sukkur in Sind, facing the railway goods-office, people would often gather near the booths and recite *siokas*, verses from the Hindu religious poet Sami. Brother Abdul Rahman would also join the gathering and sit and listen with pleasure. Now and again he would mutter to himself, "Brother Abdul Rahman, are you following it? When will you begin to see light?"

One day he tripped over a stone. He said to himself, "Brother Abdul Rahman, how proud and arrogant you are! Walking with a cocked head! If you looked down you would not stumble." He had not gone a few steps when he pulled himself up and started upbraiding himself, "Brother Abdul Rahman, how selfish you are! Was it right to have left that stone where it was? What if another wayfarer should trip over it?" After a pause he said solemnly, "Brother Abdul Rahman, if you are a good fellow you will pick up that stone and throw it aside." And he went back and flung it out of the way.

He was in the habit of talking to himself, as a philosopher to a friend, as one person to another, in constant exhortation—his form of address invariably being 'Brother Abdul Rahman.' If somebody said to him, "Brother Abdul Rahman, are you hungry? Would you like to eat?" he would turn to himself and ask, "Brother Abdul Rahman, he wants to know if you are hungry and would like to eat." And he would answer, after reflecting a little, by quoting a Persian proverb: "One must eat to live, not live to eat." In this manner he would confer with himself before answering. He wrote Persian

poetry, knew Hafiz by heart and a good portion of the Sindhi poets. Shah Abdul Latif and Sami. Of Saint Sachal, the third premier poet of Sind, he was a veritable disciple. He knew Urdu also. When there were letters in Urdu, from Punjab, Abdul Rahman had to be sought out to read and interpret them. He was of a quiet and gentle disposition. He coveted nothing, had few wants, and ate sparingly. His *godri*, the old quilt, was always wrapped round him, whatever the season. At night it served as covering. However oppressive the weather, he had his *godri* about him and defied the heat, though other men nearly died of it. Who knows what secret converse he held with the Divine Beloved under cover of his *godri*!

* * * *

One day an innocent man found himself involved in a criminal prosecution. He was charged with having stolen a gold watch belonging to a Muslim Seth, a rich merchant. The police had searched him in the presence of witnesses and found it on his person; the evidence against him was strong and it seemed unlikely that the man would be acquitted. The Seth was a man of influence. The accused stated that it was a trumped-up charge. He had one day passed by the Seth's house and the Seth had somehow got it into his head that the accused had made lewd gestures to his womenfolk. As a consequence, the poor fellow was beaten mercilessly by the Seth, and but for Abdul Rahman, who happened then to appear on the scene, the man might have been beaten to death. Even after Abdul Rahman's intercession the Seth would not be appeased. He said that the fellow had 'cast an evil eye on his honour', and it was intolerable that he should continue to live thereafter. The Seth was a man of honour. And honour was dearer...

Abdul Rahman began to hold a conference with himself. "Brother Abdul Rahman," he said, "the Seth will not desist. His honour is very dear to him. He has a sister, thirty-five years of age, and yet he will not find her a husband, because she will then demand a share of the patrimony. A woman must either have a husband or....." The Philosopher curbed himself. "No, Brother Abdul Rahman," he said, "do not lift the veil from other men's affairs. Better expostulate with the Seth again. If he refuses to see reason, you may speak the whole truth." Now, Abdul Rahman never discoursed to himself *sotto voce*. His words on this occasion had thrown enough light on the situation

and everyone present including the Seth, had heard him. Thus was the poor man exculpated. There was a buzz of gossip about the baseness of the Seth and he lost his reputation. But there was the prosecution, a made-up affair.

The Seth denied everything. He had bought off three of the four defence witnesses, who either did not appear in the court or pretended ignorance. There remained only Abdul Rahman. The counsel for the defence seriously doubted the wisdom of putting such a man in the witness-box. But the accused had implicit faith in Abdul Rahman. Being a God-fearing man he could be relied upon to tell the truth.

When Abdul Rahman received the summons he said, "Brother Abdul Rahman, you have been summoned to appear in a court of justice. Such a place is worthy of respect." That meant that he must not go there unshod. He managed to get hold of a pair of shoes for the occasion, not to look respectable, but to show defence to a place so 'worthy of respect'. At every hearing he went to the court in his *godri*, carrying his shoes in his hand according to the custom of Sindhi villagers. When he was called for evidence he put them on with ceremony. The *godri* was folded lengthwise and worn like a scarf around his neck. He had hardly stepped in when the liveried peon of the court asked him to leave his shoes outside, as others did, who did not count in the social hierarchy.

"Brother Abdul Rahman," said Abdul Rahman to himself, "the court peon is asking you to enter bare-footed, and so appear respectful. Tell him you procured the shoes for that very purpose." He did as he was bidden by his inner self and walked in with his shoes on. When the magistrate saw him, he laughed. As he took his stand in the witness-box the magistrate asked him why he was wearing the *godri* round his neck. Abdul Rahman looked inwards and communicated the magistrate's question to himself in his usual fashion. "Brother Abdul Rahman," said the monitor, "you are in court now, therefore answer with due care. Tell the magistrate sahib that it is a custom with the Hindus on important occasions to wear a *dupatta* or scarf round the neck, and that you have done likewise." The instruction was duly communicated to the honourable magistrate by the self-same Abdul Rahman.

The Serishtedar, a subordinate officer, now turned to Abdul Rahman to administer the usual oath: "In the presence of God I

swear that I shall speak the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth." Abdul Rahman went through the formality with the same scrupulous adherence to his own mode of communication.

"What is your name?"

"Brother Abdul Rahman, the Serishtedar wants to know your name." Then turning to the Court, he added, "My name is Abdul Rahman."

There was laughter in court. The magistrate, after enjoying the situation for a while, began to show annoyance. One of the advocates explained to him that the witness was in the habit of speaking thus.

"Your religion?" asked the subordinate officer.

Abdul Rahman half shut his eyes to ponder. He sensed a warning from within. "Brother Abdul Rahman," the monitor said, "you have sworn to speak the truth. The question is awkward. If you say you are a Muslim, the Hindus will take exception; if you answer you are a Hindu, the Muslims will frown. Brother Abdul Rahman, do not feel perplexed. Cut the Gordian knot by reciting from Saint Sachal the verse:

*"I am neither Hindu
nor Muslim,
I am what I am."*

The Serishtedar, did not know if this answer would do for the record, so he turned to the magistrate for guidance.

"Put him down as a Muslim," the magistrate ordered.

"Your age?"

"Tell him, Brother Abdul Rahman, that since the magistrate took upon himself to answer the previous question on your behalf, this question also might be addressed to the same quarter."

The magistrate was angry.

"You *jat*!" he thundered, "will you make your statement sensibly and properly? Don't forget you are in a court of law."

A smile played on Abdul Rahman's lips. He said, "Brother Abdul Rahman, the magistrate has called you a *jat*. Ask the magistrate sahib what a *jat* is."

Before Abdul Rahman could address the magistrate directly, that honourable gentleman shouted. "A *jat*, you fool, is an illiterate person."

"Did you hear that, Brother Abdul Rahman? The magistrate sahib says a *jat* is a man who is illiterate. By this definition, Brother Abdul Rahman, surely you cannot be said to be a *jat*. You can read and write Sindhi, Persian, Urdu, Sanskrit and Hindi. Five languages. Will you ask the magistrate sahib how many languages he knows?"

Abdul Rahman turned to the magistrate to speak. But that august personage brushed him aside.

"A *jat* is one who does not know English," he said with a note of triumph in his voice, hoping to have crushed this queer customer.

There was whispering here and tittering there in the court. Abdul Rahman's smile broadened visibly. He said to himself in a confidential though audible tone, "Brother Abdul Rahman, the magistrate says a *jat* is one who does not know English. Though he himself knows English, he is the son of Topanmal, keeper of the cattle-pound. Will you ask the magistrate, if his forefathers who knew no English were *jats*, and whether he himself is the son of a....."

"None of your presumption, you insolent rascal," roared the magistrate. "Will you show cause why you should not be charged with contempt of court?"

He was further ordered to cease talking and to submit a written statement.

Abdul Rahman stepped out of the witness-box and going towards the table indicated, bent over it and wrote as follows :

"Honourable Magistrate sahib, Brother Abdul Rahman is not guilty of contempt of court. If anyone is guilty of that offence it is you. On this day alone you have abused several witnesses. But your abusive language will not so much as touch the fringe of Brother Abdul Rahman's *godri*. Let me give you a bit of advice. Though you sit in judgment over the people, you are not their lord and master. You are their servant. We witnesses have not attended court of our own accord. We have been summoned to assist you in the administration of justice, and this is the treatment you mete out to us! Who will bother to appear in your court to give evidence if you shower abuse on the witnesses? Will you show cause why you should not be dismissed from

service for contempt of court? Brother Abdul Rahman has in accordance with the oath administered to him by the court spoken the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. so help him. God.

Signed :

Brother Abdul Rahman."

NIGHT LIKE A QUEEN

(Goverdhan 'Bharati')

*WHEN evening like an ascetic, in her saffron robe
Goes for meditation beyond the Western hills;
When the first lamp is lighted in the blue temple,
And a cloud makes an offering of a bagful of gold,
At that moment night comes flying to the sky,
Night comes swaying to the melody of the breeze.
Over her dark veil shines the string of stars,
Under it night hides its loveliness;
Coy, bashful, she walks on silently,
She looks with secret glances, enticing poets' hearts,—
"Lift your veil, queen, give me a glimpse of your beauty,
Give the fragrance of your beauty-flower to me, your bee."
Behind the curtain of mystery some one plays on the lute,
From the lute emanates the sweet sound of music,
Night, like a cup-bearer, comes dancing gracefully,
Dancing gracefully, rhythmically, mysteriously;—
Every drinker holds up his goblet-eyes eagerly,
And night pours into them her intoxicating wine.
"Wait! where are you going? Fill my cup to the brim,
Come! Kiss my eyes, O Sweetheart, give me peace!
Why do you not enclose me in your loving embrace?
O night, why do you not press my head to your breast?
Enfold me, and swing me in the cradle of your youth,
In the arms of your beauty, O make me unconscious!"*

(Translated by M. U. Malkani)

HER CUP OF POISON

(*Popati Hiranandani*)

I COULD not help being attracted by her. I had heard that men generally choose women who are fair-looking, slim and lively. This one did not quite answer to that type. Her skin was of the colour of wheat. She was well-proportioned and rather serious looking. She was about thirty.

We were in a third class compartment of a local train, and she sat opposite to me. She occupied herself with knitting a child's cardigan which seemed half-done. At Lower Parel she rose, collected her sari folds in front and got out.

I saw her another time. There had been heavy rain and the railway line ahead being flooded, the train stopped short of Grant Road Station. All passengers leapt out of their compartments. I saw her jumping down cautiously from the ladies' compartment. She was in Punjabi dress this time, in *salwar* and *kameez*, and of course the beautiful but seemingly meaningless *dupatta*. How much younger and more beautiful a woman can look in a *salwar* and *kameez*, unless of course she is of exuberant proportions! She paused to survey the situation because there was water all round. Then she hung the *dupatta* from her shoulder and tied the ends above the opposite hip. She removed her sandals and held them in one hand. With the other hand she gathered and pulled her *salwar* above her knees. With no fear now of wetting her clothes she waded through knee-deep water and crossed over. I have also jumped down and wading through the water drew near her, but she did not look behind once, even though the sound of 'splush' 'splush' which my legs made gave warning of some one following. She was totally unmindful of who looked or laughed at the sight of a woman so wading through knee-deep water. Coming out on the other side, she lowered her *salwar*, stepped into her sandals and walked to the bus stop. The bus came along, picked her up and was gone. For me, thereafter she became intriguing like a riddle.

I was a bachelor of forty. I had seen girls and of all types; those who walk with the grace of a pea-hen, or have a long slender neck

like a peacock's; others with eyes as beautiful as a gazelle's or with figures like the tendrils of a creeper. Attractive forms and faces I had seen by the hundreds but never had my mind got absorbed in one as it now was absorbed in this dream of a half-women, half-girl. The question repeatedly arose in my mind, "Who is she? With the healthy look of a Punjabi girl, eyes shaped like a Bengali girl's, hair tied into a bun like a Madras girl's, and features those of a Sindhi girl—who is she?"

One morning I took an earlier train than usual, got down at Lower Parel and waited for her. As she came out of the station I followed her. Imagine my surprise when I saw her enter a branch office of the firm for which I worked at the head office. I was the happiest man alive. So that was where she worked! I had managed to see her walk to her table and occupy the chair behind it. There was some peace in my mind. She was not beyond reach now.

It took some time, but I arranged to get myself transferred to the branch office where she worked. Now she was one of the assistants in my department!

I tried to come into contact with her, but found it difficult to establish personal relations. Apart from short replies, all relating to office work, I could get nothing out of her. Somehow, intuitively perhaps, she had sensed that I was attracted to her. And this instead of drawing her nearer to me drew her away from me. The gulf became wider. She became more wary, more distant. She seemed to be on guard all the time. And yet, my male instinct told me that the reason was not dislike of me.

God knows what kind of spell she had put upon me. I had remained a bachelor all these years, having decided to keep away from the botherations of family life, and now I could think of nothing but how to make this girl my wife. Formerly, I often ridiculed and laughed at fellows I used to see waiting, waiting in anxious expectation of a girl-friend's arrival. Now, each time I took the train and got out of it, my eyes searched for her and for her only. It was the same when entering or leaving the office. But barring occasions when she spoke over office matters, she was lip-sealed.

One day she did not come to the office. To me it seemed like a calamity. The next day too she was absent but she wrote for sick

leave. On the third day I was restless beyond measure. I tried to reason with myself. It was no use. The heart would not listen to reason. My mind became a battle-field. The heart of course won. I got her address and went straight to where she lived. Somewhat nervously I knocked at the door and waited. When it was opened to me, she was there herself. There was a look of astonishment on her face, and that made me feel uneasy. But she relaxed at once and said, "Oh! come in."

"I just called to see how you are feeling now," I said entering.

"I am a little better today," she quietly replied.

"I sincerely hope you will be well enough to attend tomorrow". I said sheepishly, "but of course I would rather you stayed away if you are not well."

"I will try and come," she said.

"Who is it?" an old woman's voice asked from the inner room.

"It's my office boss, Ami,"* Miss Balani replied.

So she has a mother, I reflected. There was a child playing on the floor of the outer room where we were.

Once she gave me a smile but it was not what smiles are usually made of. It was a strangely sad smile. I found it difficult to keep up the conversation; so after a few minutes I said goodbye and came away.

"She won't do for you," my reason said to my heart. But when did the heart ever listen to reason? I was obsessed with her more and more.

At first she would greet me with a sweet smile and I would respond with a "Hello, how are you?" Gradually we came to talk a little more freely but about office matters only. Then we began to ask each other somewhat personal questions. Outwardly we were still distant with each other, but inwardly we had come a little closer.

One day the office was closed and I was out and happened to come across her. She was walking along the footpath and leading by hand the little girl I had seen in her house.

"Good morning, Miss Balani," I said. "Out shopping?"

"She needs a pair of shoes," she replied pointing to the child, "and I am taking her to a shoe shop."

*mother

"Sweet kid, I must say. Whose child is she?" I asked innocently.

I was walking alongside of her. She turned her face to me, and said simply, "She's mine."

I got a shock. My heart dropped within me. Hers, I thought? How? She is Miss Balani. She could not be pulling my leg, surely?

"What do you mean by yours? You....."

"But she *is* mine," she said interrupting me.

"Look," I said, "I don't mind a leg-pull, but you sound serious. You are *Miss* Balani."

"I know. But you wanted to know and I have told you the truth. I am a Miss now, but I was married once—in a sort of way." She spoke without flinching, not in the least abashed.

"I am afraid I don't quite understand," I managed to say, and took leave of her rather abruptly.

What a problem girl, I thought! Why the hell should such a thing happen to me?

The next day I tried to avoid her eyes. She too did not try to catch my eye. To avoid looking wasn't difficult. What I couldn't avoid was thinking of her. I had to do something about it.

Three days later she was putting away her papers at closing time and making ready to leave. I went up to her.

"Are you going home?" I asked.

"Yes," she replied without looking up.

"I should very much like you to join me in a cup of tea somewhere," I said, in a tone of earnest appeal.

She closed her fountain-pen, locked up her desk drawer, and crumpling up a few scraps of paper threw them into the waste-paper basket. I stood looking on.

Then she raised her head and looked at me silently. It was the look of one forlorn and helpless. She rose from her chair.

"Do you want to say something to me?" she asked almost inaudibly.

"Not here," I replied. "We will sit by ourselves somewhere and talk over things at leisure."

"But it will get late for me," she said calmly.

"I shall not detain you more than half an hour," I said, attempting a smile.

She looked at me again, picked up her handbag and said, "Let's go."

Till the tea was brought by the waiter we sat in silence. I did not know how to open the conversation and broach to her what was on my mind. I looked at her and then away from her, while all the time she kept looking out of the window. Her mouth was tightly shut but her expression kept changing and once I noticed a movement at her throat as if she was pushing down something, may be, some words that had formed in her mind.

It was clear that she was under a load, and the thought of her silent suffering was too much for me to bear. I wanted to press her to my bosom, draw the sorrow out of her and absorb all of it myself.

Suddenly she turned her face to me and gave me a faint smile. But the smile seemed to say, "I can manage it all by myself. You don't have to worry."

Tea was served. I stirred the sugar in my cup that was already stirred, but it was the only way I could cover my embarrassment while saying, "I wonder if you would care to tell me where the child's father is."

She did not start. It seemed as if she had expected the question. What is more, she seemed ready with the answer.

"He left me," she replied in a level tone, looking aside.

"Where did he go?" I asked, keeping my eyes on her face.

"It is not necessary for me to know," she replied with quiet dignity, looking out through the window.

I collected all my strength and asked, "Had you married him?"

She turned her face and looked at me gravely. Her lips trembled. The hand with which she held the cup also shook a little. A tear collected at the corner of her left eye, and from the right eye a tear slowly trickled down. She closed her eyes, and bit her lower lip. Then she opened her mouth and paused to let out a deep breath.

"He had held my hand before the deity's image in a temple as a mark of the marriage bond," she said, again in a level voice.

Her lips trembled again and she visibly tried to suppress a sob.

"I had put a garland of flowers round his neck, as a mark of my accepting him as my husband," she added with a great effort at controlling herself from breaking down.

But in the process her face had flushed and her throat had choked. She took out a hanky from her handbag and dried her eyes. But her lips quivered still and tears too kept swimming in her red eyes.

Neither of us had taken a sip of the tea. Neither of us spoke any further for a while. She sat opposite to me, but her mind was clearly elsewhere. At that moment she could not have been aware of my presence.

I reflected that I might not get another chance to know further about the matter, and I was anxious to know everything. So I coughed a little to bring her mind back.

"What happened ultimately?" I asked gently.

She did not answer immediately. Instead she played with the spoon in the sugar pot, as if considering.

"Men are brave, aren't they? So he funk'd, and before the little girl was born he disappeared," she quietly replied.

"And you did not even search for him?" I asked in astonishment.

Her eyes had a different look now—one of pride and self-respect. She straightened her right shoulder, put her left hand round the nape of her neck, and leaned back.

"Should I pursue a man who had not the guts to stand by me in my ordeal?"

I decided to end the conversation there as I had not the courage to ask further questions after such a reply. I gulped down my tea to show I was ready to go. She took a sip or two and put down the cup on the saucer.

"You must forgive me, Kanta, for wanting to know all," I said. "You will soon understand why I have done it. But don't take it so hard, girl. Things may straighten out yet. Shall we go now?"

A sleepless night is one thing, a load on the mind all night quite another. The load on my mind would not let me keep in bed even. I paced up and down the room, sat, lay down, by turns, with the mind a-whirl, seeking a solution for my problem.

The next morning, both of us attended the office as usual, and each guessed what was passing through the other's mind. I tried to seek an opportunity of speaking to her further on the subject but it did not seem possible in the office. Two days later however a chance

presented itself. I had not gone out for lunch as there were pending papers to attend to. She had gone out but was back in a few minutes as she had left behind her handbag. Before she could go out again, I called her. She came and sat opposite to me. There was no one else in the office except the peon sitting and dozing on the stool at the entrance.

"I have something to say to you, Kanta, but I don't know if I should say it. I....." I said.

"There is no harm in saying it," she said reassuringly before I could finish the sentence.

"Why don't you put your child in an orphanage?" I suggested.

She flushed with anger, but controlled herself. She replied calmly but firmly.

"How can a child be consigned to an orphanage when its mother is alive and it is therefore not an orphan?" she asked.

I was nonplussed. She was right, and yet.....I wanted a solution to the problem from my angle.

"Kanta, you must know by now that I love you, and love you deeply," I said to her tenderly. "I would like to marry you if you will have me, but some arrangement for Sushi has to be made."

A mixed feeling of gratitude and disappointment registered itself on her face. She bent her head down before replying gently.

"I have no words to thank you with, but my mind is made up. Sushi will always remain with me."

Now we were closer to each other than ever before and I made bold to put my point of view before her.

"Consider the matter dispassionately, Kanta. Man is a social being. He cannot flout social conventions. All women in your situation act the way I have suggested."

"I am a mother," she said with both humility and dignity. "Even among animals, a mother does not forsake its offspring."

"But animals are not organised in a society as human beings are," I pointed out.

"Society demands of an unmarried mother that she commit the sin of abandoning her child in order to maintain appearances of virtue," she said with passion. "If that is the only solution society has for unmarried mothers, I have no right to cavil and protest. But

I shall not renounce and punish my child to save myself from opprobrium. I would never be able to find peace as long as I live, and I do not wish to sin even for the happiness of a home with you."

"But how can society accept a child born under a stigma, Kanta?" I remonstrated. I had not wished to utter these words, but in the circumstances had to.

"Child born under a stigma?" she cried out. "The child's parents can come under a stigma; by what reasoning can stigma attach to the child? What fault does it commit?" She had flared up. Rising at once she left the room. I did not stop her. I had no answer for her.

My mind became a veritable battle-ground. On the one hand I was afraid of defying social custom, on the other I was now so deeply in love with her that the prospect of giving her up appalled me. Every day the battle went on, and it seemed that the thought of my own happiness would triumph over every other consideration, but in the end social forces won.

What was the use then of doing or saying anything in the office that might lead to further complications? It was better to avoid each other as much as possible. We reverted to the old routine of a few bare words exchanged over matters relating to the office. She ceased to give me a smile. I thought it was perhaps just as well.

But, our thoughts? How was it possible to control them when the presence of each other was felt the whole day? I tried not to look at her except when work required it. But her image was ever present in my mind. Our paths had diverged, she had chosen to go her own way, and I mine. But over the paths of dreams her image came floating every night. My thoughts seemed tied up with her.

"What is this?" I said involuntarily, as I opened a letter. It was brought to me by the peon at the office at closing time. It contained her letter of resignation, and also a brief note for me.

"Your helplessness I fully understand; I only hope you will realise that I am helpless too," it said.

I finished my work and took a bus straight for her place. But the door was locked.

Days dragged out into weeks, and weeks dribbled into months. Why had I not called on her again? The day she resigned and went away I had followed her on an impulse. I realised the futility of pur-

suing her and making matters worse for myself and may be for her too. An official letter had been sent to her asking her to come and collect her dues. The letter was brought back undelivered. She had left the flat on the day of her resignation or the day before. She had sacrificed her dues, not wanting to meet me again.

I was in a perpetual night of lonesomeness.

A year and a half later a letter was delivered into my hands, just a few lines from her and in her own hand! The suddenness of it toppled me over. A wild sensation went through my body, and through my mind raced all kinds of fears, hopes and premonitions. It was all a mixup. I steadied myself to read the letter, but didn't want to, not rightaway. I wanted to drink in first the happiness of receiving it. The contents might or might not be agreeable. I lingered on the immediate and certain joy of the moment.

When I read the letter, it nearly dropped from my hands.

"You will no doubt be surprised to receive this letter from me, since I chose to disappear from your life more than a year ago. If you still cherish even a small part of your old feeling for me, I beg of you to come and see me. I am lying in the Tata Memorial Hospital, Room No. 13, a victim of lung cancer."

I was stunned. I looked up the telephone directory and dialled the hospital number. "Tata Memorial Hospital?.....What are the visiting hours after now?five, to seven? Thank you."

It was four-thirty by my watch. If I left the office at once, I could make it even by bus.

She was alone in her room. She was surprised to see me, as if she had not been quite sure that I would answer her summons. She greeted me with a smile. I drew a chair and sat by the side of her bed. The thought that she had deadly cancer filled me with foreboding, and I felt suffocated though the room was airy.

"How are you?" she asked in a tone of half pleasure, half disbelief.

I could not even answer that I was well. I seemed to have lost the power of speech, and here she was asking me if I was well, when I should have said something to express my concern about her.

"I am well enough," I managed to say. "What about you? How did this happen?"

Clouds that will burst in a rainfall are heavy and easily recognised. Her eyes showed the presence of full blown clouds in them.

Seeing that my eyes were riveted upon her face, she looked down.

"I?" she laughed mildly. "For me, it is a matter of days only. That is why I called you."

She smiled but the smile was only a veil for her sorrow. I felt limp. My entire being hung on her life, wanting to cling to it and not let it go. "Don't go," something in me kept saying.

"Why are you alone? Where is your mother?" I asked taking her hand in mine.

She looked away, her eyes loaded with tears. She could not check their flow. She did not answer, and I understood that she had died. Still I wanted to make sure.

"Dead?" I asked.

She nodded her head. I got up and sat on the edge of her bed. She turned on her side, took my arm and clung to it, and then let all the rain pour down from the clouds in her eyes. The shower fell all over her face, drenching her eyes, her nose, her lips and her throat. Her pillow and the sheet that covered her were wet. She was like a building that had collapsed in excessive rains, her head now lying helplessly on my arm.

I did not know whether I was more remorseful or grief-stricken. I could not forgive myself for having forsaken her just when she had needed me most, and I had needed her. With full force now I understood what I had not quite understood before, what she meant when she had said—a mother cannot and must not abandon her child. I had struck at her sacred instinct. What a punishment I had inflicted on her! How obtuse I had been!

Tenderly I stroked her back and her head.

"Forgive me, Kanta," I managed to say, "even though I don't deserve to be forgiven."

I broke into sobs. She broke down completely and we were crying together.

I recovered myself and dried my tears, and also hers. She moved her head from my arm, put it back on the pillow and went on looking at me with wet eyes. Something in her seemed to struggle for expression, but it could only assume the form of a question in her eyes.

"What is it, Kanta? Do tell me." I said.

"Are you.....have you.....a wife now?" she managed to ask between sobs.

"No," I replied, patting her.

It seemed to have taken a load off her mind. She took my hand, put it on her breast and looked at me with a tenderness I had not seen before in her eyes.

After a little silence she remarked, "You demonstrated to me the naked and bitter truth which governs society, and which compelled you to give me up. I....."

My hand involuntarily travelled to her lips to silence her.

"Forget it," I said. "Now you belong to me and I belong to you."

She smiled and kissed my hand. Then she moved it down and pressed it to her breast.

"I have swallowed a cup of poison," she said. "Not like others, at one gulp, but sip by sip," she added in a shaken voice.

"Why recall it all, Kanta, and revive your sorrow?"

"Oh, I am no longer sorrowful. I am supremely happy. You are here, what more can I want, now? If only this would go on and on."

I took her hand and kissed it. Then I leaned forward and kissed her lips. She shivered as a maiden might have shivered.

"You were away from me," she continued, "and yet so close to me, always close to me. I never let your image go out of my mind." She put her arms round my neck. I kissed her again. The happiness brought a little colour to her face.

The treasure chest I had longed for was before me. And yet it would soon be empty.

"May I ask you something?" she asked.

"Of course you may ask," I said tenderly, reverently. "And Command."

For a fraction of a minute she gazed into my eyes. Then gravely she said, "You were not able to accept Sushj along with me. Can you accept her without me, and take care of her when I am gone?" She continued to look into my eyes.

"I will, darling, I give you my word," I said solemnly. "She will be to me what she has been to you. I will be both father and mother to her."

I was on the point of breaking down, because even as I gave her my solemn assurance to put her mind at ease, my heart cried out, "But you must not go, do not go, for the Lord's sake, do not leave me, Kanta. I will be torn to shreds each day of my life."

But she was happy and I did not wish to rob her of the happiness she had found at last. What my heart cried out I did not utter with my lips.

I raised her head gently and placed it in my lap. She looked up at me with smiling eyes. There she lay for a while, silent and peaceful.

Now Sushi calls me "Daddy". People call me a good and kind-hearted man who has adopted an orphan girl. But I know what I am—a contemptible coward.

(Translated by T. H. Advani)

NIGHT MUST BE LIGHTED UP TOO

(Govind Bhatia)

1. *WHY* wait for sun-rise? night must be lighted up too.
Fate is wedded to action, and actions must receive their reward.
2. Fate makes no mistake, criticism is vain consolation;
Sighing is useless, silence is useful, the tide must turn again.
3. Let all lamps be extinguished, let no star remain in the sky,
Light the lamp of understanding, and step forward.
4. Your feet will be wounded on the way, the body will break to pieces and fall,
Why doubt? Why the hesitation?—this light will never die.
5. A score of bypaths on the way will tempt you by their magic calls,
Bypass them all, one and all, the highway alone will lead you aright.
6. You waste your time in thinking, you do not seek and find;
Act and act boldly and defeat even the inevitable.

(Translated by M. U. Malkani)

INCOMPARABLE PHUNDANMAL

(Loknath Jetley)

“YOU little brat! You son of a screeching sandpiper, you! Go and blow your damned whistle before your mother, you young rascal! Away with you and do not disturb my sleep or I shall cut off your ears and throw them to the crows!”

Bhai Phundanmal had flung the window open and bellowed these words. The urchin took fright and vanished.

It was mid-summer and hot as hell. Time : Three in the afternoon, when the sun burned its fiercest. Even the crows had to close their eyes. Bhai Phundanmal had just finished his meal and stretched himself on a *charpoy** for a siesta. He was about to doze off when outside, under the window of his room, a little boy had started tooth-ing his whistle. Bhai Phundanmal's sleep was disturbed and he had flared up.

Phundanmal now could not sleep. He found the heat too oppressive. After a few minutes, he lay down again. Again there were noises outside. Two boys had come into the street and started playing *itti dakar*** Bhai Phundanmal found the disturbance intolerable and got up. This time he came out of his room.

One of the boys was measuring the ground with the stick according to the Sindhi variant of this game. “*Bakat, Lain, Moon, Narr, Aar, Va-ee, Yakoo*”, he said, keeping pace with each measure. At this juncture, came a yell from Phundanmal.

“You damned son of a sheep, you blasted spawn of a goat,” he thundered.

Mimicking he continued, “*Bakat, Lain, Moon, Naar*—what a pest you are! Your father's *Naar* your grand-father's *Naar*! You bastards, have you no one at home to make you sleep at this hour? Must you play even in this heart? Let me get at you and.....” The boys, on seeing Bhai Phundanmal, took to their heels. The Bhai chased them

*cot

** tipcat

over some distance, but his age was against him and the lads, fleet of foot, turned round a corner and disappeared into a by-lane.

Phundanmal continued to fulminate on his way back. He lay down again, but sleep had now taken wings. The heat was intense. He kept tossing about on his *charpoy*. Presently the ancient clock on the wall struck four harsh, grating strokes. This was the last straw. "Go on, strike away, you ruddy thing!" he rapped out. "Every now and then you must rattle and clang, rattle and clang."

He yawned heavily and sat up. "Arise mortal man," he said to himself. "Go and seek refuge in toil."

Bhai Sahib had hardly sat up when there was a knock at the door. He now lost his temper completely. "What pestilence is it this time?" he yelled. "Won't you let me rest undisturbed even for a short while?"

"It is Ambu, O Master!" came a nervous reply. "Seth Kesomal has summoned you. He says, all the masons have come, and your presence is now needed."

"Do I owe anything to somebody that I cannot have a little rest on a hot afternoon?" snapped Phundanmal. "Go, ask the Seth to look for another artisan if he is in such a hurry. Let me see who else can set right his leaning wall. If he can find another one in the whole of Sind, I shall stop being a mason. Go tell him that, young fellow!"

Bhai Phundanmal was famous throughout the district as a master mason. No one could measure up to him. None therefore put up a house without first consulting him. His daily wage, was naturally high. Whereas other masons, doing the work themselves, charged four rupees per day, Bhai Sahib's rate for mere supervision and direction was six rupees. Even so, he could command two assignments in a day.

This time he had spent a busy morning supervising the construction of a lofty temple. Now he had to attend to Seth Kesomal's new house. The Seth had started building without calling in Bhai and a wall had been raised askew. Hence this urgent summons.

The moment Phundanmal arrived on the scene, the workers were electrified into activity. Each of them worked vigorously on his job. The masons plied their adzes more briskly and the bricks from below went up faster. The coolies moved quickly with pans of mud plaster.

Finally, the tall Baluch mixing the mud plaster now moved his legs as if they were machine-propelled.

Masons and their assistants were always scared of Bhai Sahib. Shirkers were his special target. No one, therefore, dared to slacken or relax in his presence. What they feared most was his slashing tongue, his withering sarcasm. When Bhai Sahib was angry with anyone, he would haul him over the coals.

When Bhai looked at Ottho Baluch kneading the mud plaster, caustically he remarked, "Well done, you Jat! Today you appear to be enjoying your work! Generally you move your legs as if they were stricken with paralysis! But mere leg-work is not enough. You must mix the stuff properly. Look, the water here shows on top, and there the clods of clay are not even wet. This chaff here—what, is your father going to mix it for you?" Poor Ottho was dumbfounded. The fellow had accelerated the process on seeing Phundanmal, but had clean forgotten to mix in the chaff. Not that he minded being pulled up but he resented abuse. Somewhat annoyed, he stuttered: "Bh-Bh-Bhai Sahib, d-d-do not bring up the f-f-father of this Ba-Ba-Baluch. Da-da-damn it. I'm wo-wo-working like a bu-bu-bullock, even then you s-scold me!"

Bhai Sahib turned crimson with rage. "You son of a Baluch woman," he yelled at him. "Do you think you are doing a favour to my father by working like a bullock? Scold you indeed! Should I beseech you then? Get going, you clumsy camel and mix the chaff properly. Are you mixing mud plaster or are you dancing at the wedding of your father? Shame on you, you long-beard!"

Poor Ottho! He was struck all of a heap. In silence he continued his work and Bhai moved on. Ottho knew that Bhai had only made a show of anger, but at heart he was full of the milk of human kindness. He could never forget how, a year ago, when his wife was in a serious condition after confinement and was being removed to the Civil Hospital at Larkana, Bhai had slipped some money into his hand and said, "Do not lose heart, brother Ottho. Trust in God."

Bhai Sahib now stopped near the man who was tossing up balls of mud plaster to the brick-layer above. The brick-layer, Dur Mohamed Gopang, was Phundanmal's best and favourite pupil and very dear to him. Every then, he was not spared an occasional scold-

ing. Bhai at once spotted a defect in his work and was loud in pointing it out. "Dura boy, are you simply laying brick on brick or also keeping a sharp eye to see that the wall is vertical? Pass me your plumb line,"—he spoke these words as he climbed up the ladder. On reaching the top he let fall the plumb line and observed, "The wall is askew." He glared at Dura. "Look well below" he said sharply, "is not the wall out of position?"

Dur Mohamed was crestfallen. He made no reply. With biting sarcasm Bhai added, "Go and work at the plough or mow the grass. If a grass-cutter could become a mason, walls would come up by themselves. Let me have the adze."

Bhai knocked and moved several bricks into correct position, removed the slant and then pulled up the plumb line.

Climbing down he moved about, reproving here, admonishing there.

It was an advantage for labourers to work under Bhai. Elsewhere an artisan received four rupees per day. Under Bhai, he got a quarter rupee more. Helpers also got a better wage. Apart from that, both masons and helpers were given the use of tools without charge. That is why all labourers preferred to work under him.

In spite of his sharp tongue, they joined his team. Bhai would mould a coolie into an artisan in a few years. Under other master-masons he might remain a coolie all his life. For these reasons all workers held him in high esteem.

Bhai's knowledge was not restricted to one trade only. He knew many crafts. What is more, he excelled in each. He had started life as a tailor. There were so many in the trade already, but he was soon at the top. An overcoat made by him then was still a marvel to see. A little before Partition, he had occasion to visit the city of Hyderabad. He called on the best tailor there, Narain Jagri, to order a *sherwani* for himself. He stipulated that the piece must be cut in his presence. During the cutting, Bhai checked and corrected him at every stage. Eventually, he snatched the scissors from Narain's hands, "Lad, better go and make children's shorts and shirts," he said with irritation. "A *sherwani* is beyond your competence," Bhai cut the piece himself. Narain was so impressed that he respectfully bowed before him, and touched his feet.

I remember that even at the age of 70 Bhai was a wizard with needle and thread. He used to say that a good tailor must be able to thread a needle in no time. He could do this himself in a second with eyes closed.

He gave up tailoring and took to repairing of sewing machines. He became an expert at this job. Thereafter, Bhai Sahib got interested in plumbing. He learnt it quickly. He also became a master in the art of sinking wells. The soil being mostly saline, the water in the wells was as a rule brackish. But at every site selected by Phundanmal, the water found was sweet. He would scoop out a handful of earth and pronounce whether the sub-soil water would be sweet or not.

In this manner, he went on learning and mastering trade after trade. Finally, he took to designing and construction of houses. Self-taught, he would prepare blue-prints which were the envy of qualified engineers.

One could also call Phundanmal a first-class *chef*. How and where he learnt the culinary art, nobody could tell. On festive occasions he would be engaged for supervision and advice. A few special dishes like gram-flour curry and *mithai* he would invariably prepare himself, and then no one was allowed to go near him. Unforgettable would be their taste and flavour. The spicing of vegetables was done by him personally. The preparation became so savoury, so delicious, that it could be eaten by itself without a *chapati*.

Phundanmal had a peculiar sense of humour too. He lived with his brother who was married. Food would be cooked and served by his sister-in-law. Once, when he was eating his food, he suddenly asked her to pass him the rolling-pin.

"Rolling-pin?" queried his sister-in-law in astonishment. "Whatever for?"

"Nothing much, just to ram the rice down the throat," he replied quizzically.

This was his way of indicating that the rice had not been boiled enough.

He used to get special fun out of teasing Khiamal Patoli. He would set about it in such a manner that no one could put the blame on him. He would make Bhai Tahildas his stooge. Khiamal was

known to be very fond of eating sweet *toshas*. When he was eating them on the sly Bhai Tahlil would ask Phundanmal mischievously. "What is Khiamal eating, Bhai Sahib?"

"He is eating *toshas*, my son," Phundanmal would reply.

After a while Tahildas would ask again. "Bhai Sahib, what is Khiamal eating?"

Again Bhai would reply, "He is eating *toshas*."

A third time Tahildas would put the same question and Phundanmal would make the same reply. All this was pre-arranged and when Bhai was asked the same question a fourth time, he would pretend to lose his temper and say, "Why do you bother me with that question again and again? What is Khiamal eating? What is Khiamal eating? Camel-dropping he is eating, donkey's stools he is eating—you damned son of a sheep! Do you know now? Are you satisfied? Can't you see he is eating *toshas* and not horse manure or cow dung? Can't you see for yourself?" He would turn to Khiamal and say, "Khiamal, will you tell this blind bastard, whether you are eating *toshas* or some excrement?"

Poor Khiamal would be flabbergasted. The on-lookers would double up with laughter. Bhai Phundanmal himself would put on a serious face, to make a show of annoyance.

Bhai Phundanmal was very thrifty too. Yet when he died and his cupboard was opened in the presence of *panchs**—the cupboard which everyone believed must contain his accumulated wealth—there was found in it only a small chest. The chest was unlocked in an atmosphere of suspense and expectation. All it contained was a pocket-book, a will and a little cash. The pocket-book contained a detailed account of his charities during his lifetime. A few of the entries were :—

Rs. 500 spent on the marriage of Jashamal's daughter.

Rs. 125 spent on the cremation of Atu's mother.

Rs. 100 to Ottho Baluch, for his sick wife.

Rs. 500 spent on the construction of a shed in the cremation ground.

The list was a long one.

The little cash found was assigned to charitable purposes.

*Respectable witnesses

The last entry read: "The widowed mother of Rahand has not paid me house-rent for the last ten years. No one should claim it from her. As long as she is alive, she is not to be evicted from the premises, nor is she to be asked to pay rent."

Incomparable Phundanmal!

(Translated by T. H. Advani)

SKINFLINT

(Jivat "Jote")

I AM a great miser and I am known for my stinginess to everyone in the town. In fact, I am Chairman of the Society of Skinflints, being its only educated member—a matriculate if you please. My father was a great miser too and I was an apt pupil of his. In the course of time I surpassed him. To tell the truth, I never bought a book at school. I always managed by borrowing books from class-mates. When it was time to pay fees for the matriculation examination, my friends contributed the amount.

On one occasion I had to go to Agra with my wife and two young children. For me and my wife there was no way out of buying tickets, but for the children I did not buy even half tickets. I decided to hide them under the seats if the Ticket Examiner came for checking. In this matter my wife was with me almost whole-heartedly. But—the coolies? What was to be done about them? Such a horrible lot they were. They would not touch the luggage without prior settlement of their charges. They demanded as much as seven rupees. After a great deal of haggling, I settled for two rupees with one of them.

With great effort, this fellow managed to put all the luggage in the compartment all by himself. The station being a minor one the halt for the train was brief. When the engine gave a whistle I suddenly saw the possibility of doing the coolie out of his two rupees. Quickly I prayed to my family god and vowed to give a rupee in charity on the banks of the Jamuna at Agra if he would save me the two due to the coolie. My prayer was no sooner made than it was answered. The train started to move, slowly at first. I fumbled with my wallet. The coolie walked along the platform, his hand at the window. "Please Babuji, make haste," the fellow said when he saw I was still not able to bring out the money.

"Yes, yes," I answered and made a show of nervous speed, which must have seemed to him anxiety to pay, but was in reality fear that I might be parting with the money after all.

Fortunately the train gathered a little speed and the coolie started to run too. My hand was still inside my wallet to make a show of ferretting. "Now! make the train run faster, please," I prayed, and it picked up speed. The coolie tried to keep up, but the train had now left the platform which meant the end of my ordeal. I heard him yell out the words, "Babuji, you are robbing a poor man of his two rupees, God will punish you for it."

"Go to bloody hell, you rascal! You are not the first."

The train had now left the station, but I was still looking out of the window in the direction of the coolie. When he was a pin point in the distance I withdrew from the window, thoroughly pleased with my performance. It would be a great day when I should recount this successful ruse to the members of the Society of Skinflints so that they might try it too.

The train stopped at Igatpuri. There was a sudden and unexpected rush of passengers in our compartment. Everybody seemed to be heading for it, as if it was the only one on the whole train with accommodation left. My wife suggested that I buy milk for the children because they would feel drowsy after taking it and fall asleep under the bench. Then if the Ticket Examiner came their presence would not be discovered. A good idea, I thought, and congratulated her in my mind. But, food at railway stations costs more, and half a rupee is no small matter. I thought and thought. There seemed no way out, though.....possibly.....Oh, well!.....we'd see.....Providence might help. So I called out for a milk-vendor. One appeared soon. But how funny that the fellow's face should look very much like that of the damned coolie's who had tried to extort two whole rupees from me! It could not be the same fellow in the guise of a milk-vendor, but then his face! I almost expected him to say, "Babuji, my two rupees!" By the time he had poured out the milk into our glasses—wonder of wonders!—the train gave a whistle and.....I planned the same stratagem, only with a little variation.

"Just a minute," I said, "I'll take out a ten rupee note and you can change it for me." I fumbled in my wallet to gain time, but had to bring out a ten rupee note. Tensely, I waited for the train to move. It seemed to take an age while I leaned out of the window, the note in my hand. Before I knew what was happening the milk-vendor had

quickly snatched it from me. I almost leapt out of my skin to go after it. The milk-vendor tried to pull crumpled one-rupee notes out of a dirty cloth pouch. Just then the train started to move and I nearly collapsed.

"Hurry up, man," I said, my whole body in a sweat.

"Yes, yes, Babuji," he replied, walking alongside, "I am counting out the change." I counted the seconds.

The blasted train now moved a little faster, and the man tried to keep pace by running. At long last he extended his arm to me with the balance, but just then the train had gathered speed, and by a bare half-inch I missed my money. I cried out that I had been robbed, and saw the man grin. I was about to pull the alarm chain but the thought of my children travelling without tickets stayed my hand. I returned to the window and looked out. There he was still, receding in the distance. And he seemed to mock and say, "Babuji, I got my two rupees and more—much more!"

(Translated by T. H. Advani)

THE SONG OF HOPE

(Hari "Dilgir")

*WHAT if the land is barren today, there is hope for it tomorrow,
In Spring there will be colourful display all around.*

*Wherever we go new friends will appear
And new bonds of love will be there.*

*If the Hour of Opportunity should turn away her face,
try to win her favour,*

Sweetly she will smile again and make new promises.

*If we live there are bound to be new wines and new cups,
And new faces on new festive occasions.*

*Every particle will burst into springs of light,
If vision is bright new marvels will not cease.*

*Why lose heart, from little there will be increase,
From one grain of corn million other grains will grow,*

*Flowers of hope may perish and fall into dust,
But from that dust in time will bloom new gardens bearing these
very flowers.*

Why hug the beautiful image of the past?

From a heart that has vision new beauty will arise.

Why harp on the stories of long ago,

If there is life, there will be new experiences to relate.

(Translated by T. H. Advani)

THE TWO FACES

(*Mohan Kalpana*)

PROLONGED unemployment had forced my feet on the roads on a heart-breaking job-hunt.

What if hopes are belied? For even false hopes are better than no hopes at all. Hoping against hope I went about hugging colourful dreams in my heart. The day will surely come, I thought, when I will have a job, I will have a place to live in. I will have food to eat. On waking up in the morning I will be served a cup of tea instead of abuse as now; relations will look upon me with pride as a young son who is an earning member, and who is fit to marry—a feeling common to all joint families. Surely, after I have wandered from office to office, my dreams will end in fulfilment somewhere.

My feet would be on the footpaths, but my dreams would ride in motor cars or luxuriously lounge in bungalows and storeyed mansions.

Roads meet roads, cross roads, swerve away and meet again; before criss-crossing they seem to waver and shy away, but at last they go onward. Those who wander about aimlessly observe the playful curves and crosses of these roads, put up with the extra strain to their legs and move on. The roads seeming endless, and I would trudge along, to the right, to the left, weaving crazy patterns, and at last come back to the point from where I had started, ache in my heart, but still full of visions.

I would ponder and ponder and suddenly come to a stop; and stopping I would brood afresh.

How long is this ache to be borne, how long must this Odyssey go on, I would ask myself. I am getting nowhere, getting nothing. Should I strangle some one? Is there no magic wand with which I might get all that I wish for and seek? If only I had been in America, like so many others from our country! There, they say everyone owns a motor car. Our country—hungry and naked! Starvation they say brings enlightenment. Here enlightenment brings starvation

Educated persons starve for lack of jobs. What can we do, what is there to do? Mother must have gold bangles. my brother needs a bicycle, children want toys. I only want a job. Job! When I have a job, all at home will get what they want.....

I would move on and stop near the man with books spread out on the pavement, second and third-hand books for sale. I would look at the books for endless minutes—for half an hour and longer. The thinking cap would be on again. Those half-nude Western women on the book covers—each limb tingling with the joy of life—that is obvious, but why are they nude? Women shrink through modesty, and yet they are the ones to appear nude! Why? Perhaps they shrink through modesty because they are half nude? But then, the Eastern women? They are covered up wholly and yet they shrink through modesty? Oh, I don't know.

First I would look at the pictures on the covers, then at the titles of the books: How to earn a thousand dollars, a million dollars, I would pick up such a book, look through a bit and ruminate. I would read a little, then some more. The bookseller did not object. He did not object! It puzzled me. I would read. And then I would wish that after reading it through I might find a thousand rupees—just a thousand—under my pillow the next morning. and so become rich overnight.

I did not become rich but I read several books on how to become rich—standing on the footpath. How to make soap—how to make ketchup from tomatoes—how to purchase flats cheap and sell them at a high price—how to buy sizeable claims* for a song and sell them at a fantastic profit—how to become a broker, etc. For all these pursuits, however, inclination and aptitude are required, and above all money is required! Of course, it is money that attracts money, not an empty stomach, nor unemployment, nor dreams. Where am I to bring money from to attract more money, I would ask myself. So I drew more and more upon my dreams.

Day after day.....day after day.....on the footpath, near the books spread out below.

"Where were you yesterday?" I asked the pavement book-vendor.

*After the country's partition, the Hindus who migrated to India, leaving properties behind in Pakistan were allowed to "claim" compensation.

He stared hard at me.

I continued to look at him.

"So you can speak too?" he remarked in surprise.

"What did you think?" I said.

"I thought you only brood over things."

I laughed.

"Because you are given to thinking and reflecting; I will tell you—yesterday I was arrested by the police."

"But why did they arrest you?"

"Because I sell books on the footpath without a municipal licence," he replied.

"Then the police must be arresting you frequently?"

"They do."

"And these books?" I queried.

"They take away the books too."

He was an indomitable-looking man, and yet when he said these words he showed embarrassment. But he recovered himself quickly. Because I appeared to take interest in him, he looked at me straight, his eyes shining.

"In that case, you must be losing a great deal," I said.

"I am fined five rupees, that's all."

"And, what, you pay on the nail?"

"No."

"Then what? You leave the books behind?" I prodded further.

"Instead I spend a day in the lock-up," he calmly replied.

"Which means you have a day's grub free."

"I despise the free grub—despise it intensely. But—what's the use of telling you? You won't believe me."

"Despise free grub? What more can a fellow want? You get it and still you grumble?"

"Don't say that, Babuji"* he returned reproachfully. "Many people in the world have spoken words of wisdom about the virtue of honest labour. And yet, if educated men like you talk like that uneducated persons like me should keep their mouths shut."

His forehead showed lines of concern.

*A term of respect.

"Don't tell me you prefer to get roasted like this in the sun?" I asked.

"I prefer freedom in the burning sun to confinement in the shade of the jail-house," he replied.

He is talking like a book, I thought—this vendor of books!

A man who was looking into one of his books, gave him a side glance.

"What is the price of the 'Rights of Man'?" he turned to him and enquired.

"You can't pay their price, Babuji," the bookseller returned. "The price of the book you are holding is eight annas."

"Do you read these books yourself?" I asked him.

"Only the titles," he replied frankly. "I am not educated."

"What made you to take to this line?"

He remained silent.

"Why don't you answer?"

"You will laugh to hear me."

"Why?"

"You will think I am a fool."

"No, I will not."

"I have taken to this trade so that people may read books and become better."

I gave a big laugh.

"I told you you would laugh," he said.

"You live in a world of books—you are bookish," I answered.

"True in a way. That is my trade."

* * * *

What, will people improve by reading books, I asked myself. I read books on how to make money—can I become rich simply by reading such books? One has to study first, then practise what one learns, after which alone can one gain knowledge based on experience. If people could improve merely by reading, the betterment of man's mind would be left to literature. From time immemorial great men have written books, and it is true that people as a result turn more and more to the good. But then, why is evil ever on the increase? Who is to blame, my mind tried to probe further and further. Man or man's system? There are different systems—which are good, which

are bad? I don't know, but I do know that the fault lies in man's system, and in nothing else. This man may sell thousands of books but nothing will come of it. Books may help a little, but the remedy lies elsewhere. And yet.....I may be wrong. I am jobless. I am not likely to understand these things clearly. My sole object is to find a job. Why should it matter to me whether the world progresses or not?All my thinking would bring me back to—I want a job!

"May I ask you something?" the bookseller enquired.

"Ask," I said.

"Why do you read books on how to make money only?"

I smiled.

"I am without a job," I said.

"But you cannot find work by reading such books?"

"I should like to do business," I said.

"What kind of business?" he asked.

"To decide that I read your books," I said.

"Have you any money?"

"If I had money, there would be no problem!"

"All right, May I say something?"

"Say it."

"Will you come into my business?"

"With you? O Lord, no!"

"Why not?"

"People would remark—Oh, this well-dressed young man is selling second-hand books on the footpath!"

"Here's a solution. Wear a false beard and moustache. No one will know you."

"But that must be an offence," I said.

"Even if it is, it is not an offence which harms anyone."

"I'll think it over," I said.

I considered the matter and saw that there was nothing wrong with the course even though technically it might be an offence. I don't care if my dreams don't come true. Here's a chance of earning a little money by honest work. Who will recognise me in a false moustache and beard, dark glasses and a hat? I'll look a different man. Without embarrassment, I shall be able to look others in the face. I shall recognise others. No one will recognise me.

My young companion Shanker Obale had gone after some work and I sat incognito selling books. Shanker had left them well-arranged and I sat leaning against a wall, looking now at the books, now at persons interested in them and in between at the smart-looking passers-by. Our books too were smart-looking paper-backs and I was reflecting on my occupation and the money it would bring me. A book that originally sold at one rupee Shanker sold at one-eighth the price. Other books he sold *pro rata*. Our profit was a hundred per cent, and I would receive from Shanker one-third of the profits—about two-and-a-half rupees per day. We were to share the day's work equally.

It was my first day at the job. I had read a few books on general knowledge, but not one on how to sell books. The previous night I gave the matter some thought and in the morning I was ready to face the situation. I had made fruitless efforts to find a job, and had landed in this business. Well and good, I thought. I am lucky, I thought. Shanker had not asked for a deposit as he very well might have done. He had not even asked for my address. He had just tried to put me on my feet. He wished to see men improve by reading books but couldn't read them himself, and yet here he was full of faith in his fellow man which not all the books taught in schools could have inculcated in him. From where did he acquire so much faith, I asked myself, but I could not answer the question.

"What's the price of 'Woman'?" one customer enquired.

"How can I possibly answer that question, brother?" I replied with humility.

His look showed that he thought me a fool.

With complete self-confidence, I added, "In America woman dances, in Russia she ploughs the field, in India she flings herself at the feet of God's image and curses her fate."

"What rot are you talking?" the man said scornfully.

"You asked me and I told you. In America diverse are the charms of a woman. She is like a musical instrument that will play any tune you would like to evoke from it; in Russia she is like an ear of corn, and in India she is like the candle burning in a temple."

"You seem to be a poet," the man remarked.

"I, a poet! Not you who ask the price of woman? I stated only what I have read in books, with a little addition from my own imagination. Only she is one thing at a time."

"I asked you the price of this book entitled 'Woman' and here you go off the rails!" He bent down and picked up the book.

I felt foolish, and quietly said, "I am sorry—eight annas."

He looked at me and smiled, noticing that I felt rather ashamed of my flight of fancy. He paid the price and walked away with the book under his arm. He had a very special style of tread. He lifted his feet so that the soles of his shoes turned almost fully towards me as if in scorn. His arm swung joyfully, giving me the feeling that the woman on the book-cover was already by his side.

Two young girls came along and stood looking over the books; one of them turned out to be my neighbour. Instead of looking at the books she looked at me. For a second I thought she had recognised me. I felt nervous and self-conscious. Carefully I ran my hand over the moustache and beard. I fixed the dark glasses properly over the bridge of my nose, and set my hat at a proper angle. Then I mustered courage and looked at her. Neighbours had given her the name of Anarkali*. She spoke to her companion in an undertone in Sindhi.

"Look at this man's moustache, Meeru. How very lop-sided!"

Which meant she had not seen through my disguise, I had been nervous without reason. But now Meeru laughed and I felt small again, having understood their language. I set right the moustache and addressed them in Hindustani.

"What makes you laugh, young ladies? My moustache is not false. I was sleeping when my small son tried to clip it with the scissors. On that account....."

They laughed again.

"Anyhow, what is the price of this book?" Anarkali asked.

"Which book?" I asked.

"This one 'How to Lose Friends'."

"Twelve annas," I said.

"What, you want to read this book?" Meeru asked her.

*A beautiful dancing girl at the court of the Mughal Emperor Akbar. The name Anarkali is compounded of two words : *Anar* meaning pomegranate and *Kali* meaning bud.

"Of course," Anarkali replied. "Where's the difficulty in winning friends? A smile and a couple of sweet words do the trick. That kind of friendship does not put a value on a girl's character but on her smiles and sweet words which remain the sole aim and object. The girls also aim at nothing more than a cup of ice cream and free movies to see Raj Kapoor and Dilip Kumar. I am sick of such friendships. That I should give up smiling is not possible. Nor can I possibly speak rudely. I must do something else."

She opened the book and started reading out from the Introduction. "The first and foremost rule is not to make new friends. Never talk of new things to old friends. Talk of old familiar things—particularly those that you know will bore them. Very sweetly point out to them their faults and in their presence speak highly of persons whom they detest, and to whom they may have been nasty in your presence."

Fine, I thought, but is it Introduction or the entire book in a nutshell?

She put a one-rupee note in my hand, and was off, arm in arm with, Meeru.

"Your balance of four annas, Anarkali!" I blurted out after her.

Hearing her name called she stopped abruptly. Usually she shows annoyance when addressed by that name. But now she was speechless with astonishment. She came over, while Meeru stayed back.

"Who are you?"

"No one," I said, almost in a sweat. "Just your four annas, please."

She took the change but was still bewildered, her gaze fixed on me.

Suddenly: 'You—Deepak'! You....."

"Compulsion," I said, without looking up.

"But why this masquerade?"

"Compulsion."

"Circumstances drive a man even to steal, but I think that is much more romantic!" she said.

"Yes, like losing friends!"

"Do your people at home know?"

"They only know that I have found work. What kind of work no one knows."

"But you are a matriculate of two years' standing!"

"Of what use is that? The Railways stopped recruiting men. For working in the mills I have not the constitution. My health is not so good as to permit starvation for long. Stealing is not in my nature. I am somewhat self-respecting, to which fact you will easily bear testimony as I have never taken any kind of liberty with you. That is why I feel that I am not altogether unworthy of the consideration you are showing me. To safeguard my reputation I have disguised my face. I cannot, like the lower class of people, sit openly at this kind of business. But I must do something and this disguise is the only way I have found. I beg of you not to disclose my secret to anyone, if you can understand my reasons. If you cannot understand, then please treat the matter as an ordinary incident, not worth mentioning, and forget all about it. Forgive me for having called you Anarkali."

"Don't worry, my dear" she said sweetly. She went away, but not without looking back after going some distance, and I felt that there is nothing more galling than pity. Pity has two faces—one of sweet humanity, the other of a galling judgment that the poor fellow is finished.

But surely I am not finished, I thought. My dreams are finished, yes. But life is not dreams, life is reality. Life is like a sheet, and dreams are only embroidery on that sheet. The sheet that I have acquired is plain; what if there is no work done on it? One doesn't get finished in this way. Life on the contrary begins now. A man who is not afraid of hard work, has faith in the future. But then—this fear of social opprobrium? What can I say about it?—nothing! Because about these things I don't know anything.

Customers kept coming, but they were mostly depressed-looking, their spirits crushed by fate or circumstances. They seemed to have lost their backbone. Their shirts were almost out of their trousers, hiding the old leather belts. Their shoes had not known polish for days. Some stood and read, to kill time, as if life were not a boon but a burden, a curse, as if it was being wasted anyhow and they felt they might just as well waste it in a somewhat interesting manner. You saw two kinds of bright eyes. One kind was indicative of wealth, the other of poverty. In the kind, indicative of poverty only one noticed

that the brightness had behind it a hint of tears. Among us poverty is supposed to be engineered by fate, I thought, and those who so believe also say that what the hand of destiny writes no one can alter. But people in western countries not only seem able to erase every word of it but control destiny itself so that she seems to write what she is dictated to. How can I say who is right? I read only cheap books and newspapers, so what do I know? I only know that there are lakhs of young men without employment. Among us life has no value, death has. A dead man is bound to receive two yards of cloth to cover him but one who lives may not get two slices of bread.

I stopped thinking at once. I felt I had started considering matters about which I did not know enough. Of course, I had enjoyed the train of my thoughts. Everyone likes his own thoughts, because no one else is likely to bother about them. If everyone stopped taking interest in his own self and tried to take interest in others, they might understand one another's pain, and try to remove pain as such. If they did that would not life be a wonderful thing, I asked myself. Ouf! thoughts, thoughts and more thoughts and I don't really know anything!

* * * *

I stood in a magistrate's court. Offenders brought here are practically of the same kind and therefore the punishment meted out is of the same kind. A court clerk calls out their names and a special police constable recounts their offences. Within minutes the imposed fines are announced.

I had four rupees in my pocket.

Suddenly, as if from nowhere, a police van had appeared and I was hauled into it. I had taken care of my beard and moustache even before taking care of my books. The constable had held me by the scruff of my neck and I had accompanied him, feeling sorry for myself, Shanker seemed to have got lost and I seemed to be on the point of getting lost.

My name was announced.

The magistrate spoke.

"Don't you know that it is an offence to sell books on the pavement without a licence?"

"Yes, Sir."

"Then why did you do so?"

"I wanted to earn a living."

"But why take the law into your hands for a living?"

"Sir, when it is a question of bread the law comes into one's hands of its own accord," I quietly replied.

For a second the magistrate seemed nonplussed.

A police constable had his eyes on me all the time. Out of fear I put my hand on the false beard and moustache. Suddenly the image of the police lock-up came before my mind. Shanker had said that he despised free grub. Now that it seemed to draw near me, I understood what he had meant.

The constable who had been watching me came forward and suddenly jerked off my beard and moustache. The hat was already in my hand. Being confused, I took off my glasses as well. A hush fell on the court.

"Will you speak the truth and say who you are?" the magistrate thundered.

"I am an educated and respectable young man."

"Then why this disguise?"

"To safeguard my reputation."

"Meaning?"

"I was afraid that if my friends saw me selling old books on the foot-path, they would ridicule me. I do not like to be ridiculed and I do not like the smile of pity."

"But you know disguise can be an offence?"

"I felt, Sir, that what harms no one cannot be an offence."

"You talk like an immature person," the magistrate remarked. "What is the evidence that your intention did not go beyond a harmless activity? You might be selling banned books or obscene photographs— even stolen goods. Such possibilities are not to be ruled out."

"Would you permit me to say something, Sir?"

"Yes, but be brief."

With humility and respect I addressed him.

"Because of such possibilities, Sir, is an innocent man to be denied the opportunity of honest work to keep the wolf from his door? For fear of social opprobrium I cannot openly be a vendor on

the foot-path. Because some people can misuse a disguise, must I refrain from making a harmless use of it and forego my right to live? If the law does not permit it, may I ask in humility Sir, what I should do?"

For a while the magistrate appeared sunk in thought. Then, he said "To what extent you are speaking truthfully has to be investigated."

The courts have their own code. Matters must not be delayed. The magistrate ordered an enquiry to be made by the police. I was to be held in the lock-up for twenty-four hours.

At night I was belaboured by the police during interrogation.

I was administered blows and kicked till I was blue in the face, with a view to finding out who I really was and why I had disguised my face. Truth can deliver us from a lie, but what is there that can deliver us from the truth? I was tempted to lie, to say I was a common thief, a burglar, a bad character. I would be jailed. I thought, but I would at least be spared more thrashing. But I had no evidence to prove that I was a thief, a burglar or a bad character. So I had quietly and patiently to put up with what I got.

After the pounding, they gave me a cup of tea and two slices of bread.

Just then I happened to look outside the lock-up cell. Shanker was standing there, smiling quietly.

"So you too like free grub?" he asked.

"Yes," I returned.

"Then, you do not hate it?"

"Yes, I hate it. I hate it like poison. That is why I am eating it."

"Really! why?"

"So that I may be able to laugh at stupid laws, at this police mentality of merciless beating, laugh in derision, in scorn. It will be fun."

"Fun?"

"Yes, Shanker. For the first time in my life I have been beaten severely. My only crime is that I am not able to tell them what crime I have committed, when and where, and....."

"I had imagined that....." Shanker interrupted me, but he did not finish the sentence, being overcome by emotion.

He took out a five-rupee note from his pocket.

"Not finding you on the foot-path, I understood everything," he managed to say at last. "You are a middle-class man after all. I reflected. So I brought five rupees along to prevent your going to jail."

"Shanker, tell me what made you the type of man you are?" I asked in humility.

"The pain of life," he replied. "It has taught me to love my fellow men. It has taught me that they are not cruel or sordid by nature. Circumstances have forced them to become what they are. You too have gained experience now. Perhaps you would like to go back to your old life?"

"No, Shanker," I said. "I shall work with you. My dreams lie shattered in the dust, which was only to be expected. But now I shall come and work with you openly, as I am. I see now that it is simply a habit with people to laugh and ridicule others. They don't know what merits ridicule and what does not. But let that be, my friend Shanker, could you do one thing for me?"

"Yes, what is it?"

"Go to my people and tell them I shall not be able to return home tonight. It was my first day of work, and my mother will be anxiously looking out for my return. Do not say anything more. She has gone through the pain of her son's prolonged unemployment; she will not be able to bear the pain of his humiliation.....Shanker! You are crying! But it is a common thing in our country, Shanker! Many mothers are going through this pain."

"I have a mother too. She also cries on my account. Kamble's mother cries. Shivram's mother also cries."

The tea had gone cold. I dipped a piece of bread in it and laughed, unrestrainedly.

"Let's laugh at life, Shanker, laugh derisively." I said.

A police constable went and stood near Shanker. He had seen me being beaten and he gave me a look of sympathy. I wished to say to him, "Brother, you are forced by a system to administer a beating, and I am forced by circumstances to receive your beating." But I did not.

(Translated by T. H. Advani)

SALT OF THE EARTH

(*Krishin Khatwani*)

THE court had adjourned for the day and I left my chamber. At the door a peon in uniform bowed and *salaamed*. Another one followed me with files. The crowd in the corridor stood aside deferentially to make way for me. Advocates standing here and there nodded to me with a smile. I walked with a solemn gait till I got into the waiting car. The peon with files sat with the driver.

Because of my position, I naturally receive importance and respect. When I sit in court and a committed person is produced before me, I feel that I have a third eye like the eye of God Shiva with which to penetrate the dark depths of circumstances behind the case, and as such, it is not his Creator but it is I who hold his destiny in my hand.

Today, however, a strange case was put up through which this third eye could not see. When I looked at the man charged with the crime, I could not help feeling certain in my heart that he was perfectly innocent. All my sympathy went out to him, but the evidence against him was strong, and the law, irrespective of other considerations, would have to take its course. I had adjourned the case. I could not avoid the feeling that I was shooting at people in the dark.

As the car gathered speed, the fine silken strands of my hair waved in the breeze. The sense of oppression grew and it seemed as if from somewhere outside a small pecking bird of pain had flown in and settled on my heart. My vision grew hazy, and soon out of the haze emerged a picture clear and strong.

It was a village in Sindh, full of dust. All the houses were made of clay bricks. The roads were of plain dry earth. That is where I lived and was schooled in childhood. There were other boys also. They formed themselves into gangs. To one of these I belonged. After school we would loaf about in the streets or trespass into private mango groves and pluck unripe mangoes, sharp to the taste but enjoyable nevertheless. When we had money we visited a stall for aerated drinks. Sometimes we would occupy ourselves in the sport of shooting at

birds with clay pellets from a catapult. Or it would be a game, now of marbles, then of tipcat, in the open space of the village.

I used to get half an anna as pocket money. Some boys got a quarter. Even so, because everything in those days was unbelievably cheap, we had roaring times together, sitting outside the food shop of the village we loosely called a "hotel". Sometimes we even engaged in gambling. Due to lack of coins we would use pebbles for stakes, and losses and gains were squared up little by little in days to come, by money payments.

One day, I lost eight annas. Eight annas in those days was a hell of a sum, particularly for a youngster, and it was not easy for anyone of us to get it together. I used to brag about my father being a rich man to look important in the eyes of my companions. As a result my friends kept pressing me for payment.

The memory of the village calls up several images and scenes vividly before me. Incident after incident re-enacts itself before the mind's eye, each one a story even as each case I conduct is a story. The village of hot winds during the day and cool moonlight at night now appears as a corner in paradise. The waters of life flowed past through it leisurely. All its inhabitants lived like one family.

Women kept to inner rooms. The outer halls were men's apartments. We youngsters had access to both. The women would say, "you are big fellows now—why do you still keep behind the women's wrappings? Go out!" The men would say, "You are kids yet—why don't you go to the inner rooms?"

Afternoons in the village were so hot that it was like an oven. Everyone would have a siesta except those who were too poor to afford this luxury. Whenever there was an unoccupied string cot in the men's room, I would have my siesta there, because a tremendous *punkah** with a cloth frill, and suspended from the ceiling, used to be kept swinging by a long cord from the verandah, the cord passing out through a hole in the door frame. The task of pulling the fan and keeping it rhythmically moving backward and forward all the afternoon rested on the Muslim servant Jumma. But the weather was such that no one could help feeling sleepy and Jumma used to fall into a doze now and again, the sweat streaming down his face and neck, wetting his

*Large fan

beard. He would try very hard to keep awake because if he dozed off the fan inside would stop and the sleepers would wake up and call him names.

Jumma had a longish face with a thick nose, wide forehead, short goatee beard and eyes touched with ground antimony. His hands and arms were hairy, and his head would be swathed with a round turban. His eyes always shone beautifully and when he looked at a person he invariably smiled. With us youngsters he would cut a joke and laugh.

It was now almost three weeks since I had lost eight annas in gambling and I was still not able to pay it to my friends. They had asked for their amounts several times but I gave them some excuse or other and managed to get respite each time. Lately, I had begun to avoid going to their gatherings in the evenings.

It was extremely hot on the day of the incident I am recalling. The sky was like a furnace shedding a rain of fire. Not a bird could be seen anywhere, and stray cats and dogs had taken shelter in human dwellings or in dirty water drains. Even the houses and streets and the air itself seemed to be gasping for breath. My sleepy eyes felt like hot coals. Jumma had sprinkled water in the courtyard a number of times since morning but the earth had drunk it up quickly each time. We were sleeping in the men's room, and Jumma as usual was pulling away at the *punkah* from outside.

Possibly everybody else was asleep. I could not. I was tossing and turning restlessly. The debt of eight annas was preying on my mind for I was losing my good name with friends. Formerly they looked up to me with some respect, now they teased and made fun of me.

My father who was sleeping on an adjoining cot turned over his side but was asleep. While he turned over a rupee coin fell out of his long shirt pocket. I saw it. For a while I just kept looking at it. It seemed to be the answer to my problem. My heart beat fast. Without making a noise I got up, took a step, picked up the coin and was back on my cot. I tried hard to sleep, but could not.

It was almost evening. The men had not yet got up from sleep. I rose and tiptoed out into the verandah. Jumma sat reclining against the wall, and alternately pulling at the cord and releasing it to keep the *punkah* swinging inside. He looked sleepy himself but was making a continuous effort to keep himself awake.

When he saw me he said gently, "Young Dewan*, where are you going in this hot weather?"

"Oh, nowhere in particular," I replied. "I'll be back in a few minutes."

So saying I went out.

At sunset there was a good crowd outside the food shop. I paid off my friends and still had a fat balance. With that I ordered things to eat for all of us. We sat in the chairs outside the shop. Just then Jumma came along. He had finished his work and was returning home. Seeing me, he came forward, and said smiling, "Salaam, young Dewan. I see that you are having a nice party!" When he saw the dishes on the table, he stared in astonishment.

"Who has given this party today?" he asked innocently.

"Your young Dewan," one of the gang replied, pointing at me.

Jumma went off smiling.

At night I was uncomfortable, afraid that my father might come to know of it. Only if Jumma hadn't come up, I wished. In the morning however I forgot everything, got ready and went to school.

It was afternoon. I was returning from school and saw a crowd outside the men's apartment. My father was accusing Jumma of the theft of his rupee before the assembled neighbours.

"Since he has stolen my rupee, who can say how many times he must have stolen before. In a house full of things who can say what is missing, what is not?"

Remarks were being bandied about between others about the disloyalty and low character of servants.

My father beat Jumma mercilessly with his bamboo stick to make him confess.

"I have not stolen your rupee," Jumma pleaded, his turban at the feet of my father as a mark of humility and loyalty. "I may be poor but I cannot be false to those whose salt I have eaten, please believe me."

But my father would not believe him and the police were summoned. Jumma was taken away and locked up for two days. They whipped him there till his flesh showed, to make him say that he had stolen the money. But he did not.

*Appellation of respect

Months passed. Jumma was dismissed from his service with us. But he could get no other job in our village as every one pointed at him as a thief. He could not get a job even in another village. At last he hired himself out as a day labourer in a field, and that meant some days without work, and without food.

One evening I was returning from my father's garden and met Jumma on the way. He came forward, bowed and touched my feet to show respect as of old. I turned red with shame. I looked at him quietly for a while. He had become weak and had aged perceptibly in a matter of months. I could not contain myself any longer.

"Jumma, you knew that I had stolen the rupee," I said. "Why did you not speak out?"

"I had eaten your salt all my life, young Dewan," he replied. "I am a poor man, and will manage to live through my allotted days. How could I accuse my young Dewan?"

He waited for a while and then added, "I remember still the time when you were small and I used to play with you. I would become your horse and you rode my back with a tree twing in your hand for a whip. Your grandfather was extremely kind to me. If he had been alive today, no one would have dared to point a finger at me."

He tried to smile, but instead tears shone in his eyes.

He passed on. I went and sat on the bank of a canal with a great hurt in my heart. When the moon rose in the sky I felt that a lamp had been lighted in my being. I saw that here was a jewel of a man, a rare specimen of human kind, and that we were a contemptible and criminal lot.

(Translated by T. H. Advani)

THE TREE AND THE AXE

(Hoondraj 'Dukhujal')

THE cycle of Autumn was over, Spring returned to earth
Dry trees turned green, million flowers blossomed.
Breezes burst from the heavens, every branch swayed in joy,
Forest-birds played a thousand pranks in merriment.

*In such a sweet season, a blacksmith left his home,
With a shining sharp axe-blade in his hand,
Wending his way, hoping some rich customer
Might buy the implement at a handsome price.
Seeing a wayfarer at any turn on the path
He would cry : "Who will buy this matchless axe?"
Wearied with walking, as the shades of evening fell,
Under a shady tree, he rested his limbs awhile.
The breeze blew softly, the tree emitted perfume,
In the coolness of the shade the blacksmith fell asleep.*

*Every leaf of the tree made melodious music,
From the mouth of the wind sweet songs emanated.
The axe-blade could not tolerate the joy of the tree,
It thought every leaf was gossiping about it !
As the wind swayed the tree, as every branch swung,
The dark-souled axe fretted with jealousy.
At last, red-faced, it addressed the tree angrily :
"Laugh your heart out, I'll see you presently;
Within my presence deem not your life safe.
Who am I ?—Open your eyes, see who I am !
Inquire about my brave deeds from your elders,
Who even in their graves are hushed in awe of me.
Huge babul forests still tremble at my name,
At my very sight they try to keep at a distance.
I have a body of steel, my name is 'the axe',
My heart is as big as the hill-high trees I fell.*

*You displayed your youthful pride and mocked at me;
Wait a while ! you shall be punished for your sin."
So saying, the axe-blade panted for sheer wrath,
The blood of his body boiled with inner fire.*

*At the groundless wrath of the axe the tree replied :
"I wonder what sin I have committed against you !
Be sensible, brother axe, do not get excited;
Truth from falsehood cannot be distinguished in anger.
If you are great, why, God is greater still,
Who has adorned all Nature with His own beauty.
If some sands of life be left in my Fate,
You cannot even remove my bark, try as you might."
On one hand, the ugly axe grew awfully wroth,
On the other, the humble tree stood quiet and calm.*

*After resting his limbs, as the blacksmith walked along,
He met a wood-cutter who took a fancy to the axe.
The forest wood-cutter bought the axe eagerly,
The blacksmith's fortune smiled—he got the price he wanted !
Buying the axe-blade, as the wood-cutter proceeded,
He saw standing before him the very tree he desired.
He thought: Why not cut this tree and fell it to the ground;
It will yield so much wood, it will be highly useful;
I'll sell the fire-wood and make my living for a year !
He made up his mind and prepared to cut the tree.
Wanting a handle for the axe, he had not far to go,
He jumped on the tree and chopped down a branch.
He fashioned a handle and fixed it into the blade;
With stroke after stroke the tree fell to the ground.*

*The tree fell down, and the dark-souled axe got its chance,
It taunted the tree and cooled its burning heart :
"Tell me, O tree, where is your courage gone now?
Where is your pride with which you mocked at me?
O swell-head, if you've still some vanity left,
Remember, I shall tear your remaining limbs to pieces."
Replied the tree : "Dark-souled axe! give up bragging;
Give up your vanity, indulge not in self praise.*

*Could you have matched me? You had not the courage to do so:
Felling me was a hard task, it was not your work alone.
When my own limb helped you in the shape of the handle,
Then alone the wood-cutter succeeded in felling me.
Had he placed empty reliance on you alone,
His children would have died of hunger, he would have ruined himself.
Your vanity is useless, your pride undeserved,
I've fallen because I've been betrayed by my own !"*

*My countrymen, hear the story of the tree and the axe,
Look at your country and look at your own condition.
The tree stands for the motherland, yearning for freedom,
For God's sake, be not the handle for slavery's axe !
This is no advice, but the cry of 'Dukhaya'l's' heart:
Could it awake my sleeping countrymen to be vigilant !*

(Translated by M. U. Malkani)

NAMING THE BABY

(*Chatru Nagpal*)

"CONGRATULATIONS!" my wife said to me in her naturally sweet voice, as I returned home from work.

My immediate reaction was one of happiness, for it could only mean good news, and any good news is welcome. But when I asked "what for," she started talking in riddles.

"Try a few guesses," she said.

I tried to consider some possibilities, but nothing that I could think of seemed a likely answer. Suddenly my eyes fell on a small sewing job in her hand and I shuddered! No, not again, I thought nervously! Had even the last preventive failed? I snatched the piece out of her hand—it was her own blouse. I felt relieved. She understood my dread and laughed. I could not guess and she wouldn't tell. I coaxed her, tickled her playfully, so that she shrieked and shook with laughter, but she would not tell. I threw up the sponge, but no! She would not let me do that. I must use my head, she persisted. I got fed-up and said, "To hell with it then! Women will never be brief and come to the point."

"Oh, is that so?" she said full of animation. "But you forget that it is woman who gives to man's life a lovely spread, gives it colour and a magic power. Without these your spirit would be dull and drab."

Fondly I got hold of her long lovely plaited hair, coiled it round my neck like the snake of god Shiva and said, "Praised be your name, woman! I have no answer to that. But how much longer do you propose to keep me in suspense?"

Coily she freed her hair and said, "You cannot guess even a simple thing? I have put *Lalu* in school today."

"I see. Which school?"

"Oh, the one that the neighbour's children go to."

"I am glad," I remarked. "But under what name did you register him?"

"Oh, I've done everything," she replied, dodging the question. "Paid his fees, bought him books and a slate. I've performed your job and you don't even pat me."

"My dear, dear Maharani, I am prepared to put even your father and mother for having brought forth a girl like you to enrich my life. Are you satisfied?"

"You are calling me a Maharani only to feel a Maharaja yourself," she teased.

"Well, well, well, you have a wonderful instinct, I must say. But tell me now—what name did you register in the school?"

"The same one—Kishore!"

"Kishore!" I shouted, my face burning. "I had told you times out of number that we will not give him that name. But you must have things your way and so you put him in school without even asking me."

The fact is we had not given the boy a name even though he was five now. There had been endless arguments, prolonged consultations over it, with no agreement reached. According to the Brahmin who had cast the boy's birth horoscope, the position of planets at the time of his birth required that the name should begin with the letter T—Timbhu, Tikam, Topan, Taakan. But in these days no one gives such horrid names to their children. No one follows the Brahmin's direction. Parents give to their babies the names they fancy most. Of course, everybody who counts in the family is consulted. My father wanted my son to be named Jawaharlal, but I did not share my father's sense of leader-worship. My mother was for naming him after the great child-saint Dhuru of ancient times, at which suggestion the child's young mother, my bride, turned up her nose. My wife's mother, brother and sister had all to be consulted too. To my mother-in-law the baby was precious like the ruby among jewels and so she fondly called him Lal. My brother-in-law brought forth a long list of names of brave warrior heroes. He liked the name of Chandra Shekhar best. He was of opinion that in these days our country needed brave men, and if we gave such names to children, they would grow to be brave themselves. I had liked his suggestion and would have followed it but the list was too long and I found each name more attractive than the other, and could not decide which one to select for my boy. A friend sitting

near me at the time said, "Use any one and keep the remaining ones on the waiting list for future use." "Don't be silly, man." I replied. "Who wants a list for future use? Two kids are enough in these difficult times."

My sister-in-law is a film fan. She came out with names of actors—Ashok, Anoop, Prem Kumar, Manoj Kumar, Saroj Kumar—sixteen names in one breath. Apart from these, names like Ramesh, Suresh, Naresh, Paresh, though somewhat common, are still being given to boys, she said. When I liked none of these, she dived into the film-world again and brought up a new name. Her imagination stirred, she said in a tone of mystery and wonder, "Do you know what name Nargis and Sunil Dutt have given to their baby boy?"

"Yes, yes, I know" I said. "Sanjaya is his name, and it is from the first chapter of the Gita. "I study only the first chapter every day because I don't understand the remaining seventeen." That is how my sister-in-law too got disappointed.

Being a great reader of fiction, I thumbed through the pages of novels of Prem Chand and Sharat Chandra. The sweetest and most romantic names are those of Sharat's characters—Chandidas and Devdas. But the best of all is Shrikant, the name which calls up the whole romantic world of Bengali literature. My mind was made up. I would be Shrikant's father—aha! But when my wife heard my decision she resorted to silent sulking.

"What's wrong?" I had perforce to ask.

"What's not wrong?" she retorted. "But I know I don't count. Give him any name that you like."

"That can't be", I said in an effort to mend matters, but it didn't mend any, for she continued to show quiet resentment. Not a word could I get out of her. I was perplexed. After prolonged cajolery on my part she spoke at last:

"You couldn't please any of my relations, could you? Not one of the scores of nice names they and I suggested was to your liking, and now you come out with a silly old-fashioned name."

I got sick of the whole matter of naming the child, and preferred not to give him any name at all and let him go through life without one. The name Kishore was obnoxious to me, being borne by a comedian. I had also other reasons for disliking it. It must be a

name for people born under stars positively hostile to me. When I was in school, a boy named Kishore used to thrash me mercilessly. I was never a match for him. I tried to win the favour of our monkey-god Hanuman by a daily recital of 'Hanuman Chalisa' but never was I able to give him tit for tat. Then there was a man named Kishorilal whose daughter I fancied as a young man. I went up to him for permission to marry her.

"You!" he exclaimed in anger. "You want to marry my daughter?"

He called for a mirror and held it before my face, in her presence.

"Have you seen your nose?" he said. "With such a nose you want to marry my daughter?" he laughed scornfully.

A lot more he said about my poor nose, and I returned humiliated though not cured of love for his daughter. The whole of that year I did nothing but write love-sick poetry.

A third chap in my life associated with that name was an officer named Jugal Kishore. He was my boss. He must have been my enemy even in my last life. Over the slightest slip he would send for me in his chamber and shout at me while other clerks would peer through the window pane and witness my humiliation every time. After I got married, I was sometimes late in attendance and the man had my increment stopped for a year. Naturally enough I thoroughly detested him and when he was transferred I distributed sweets among the staff, showing outwardly however that it was a farewell gesture, in his honour.

I could not possibly relate to my wife all these incidents in my life. And in any case, women are obstinate. Never will they climb down from the position they once take.

"You can call him by any name you like," she would say, "I am going to call him Kishore."

"Are you crazy, woman?" I would retort. "How can the father call his son by one name and the mother by another? Why are you so obstinate? Is there no other name that you can think of besides Kishore? Did you set your heart on this name for a son when you were still a maiden?"

That did it. She hauled me over the coals, recalling the new name I had given her after marriage according to custom.

"That cap fits you all right. A nice name you chose for me, didn't you?—Annapurna! That's the name of a hotel. I kept quiet dur-

ing the wedding ceremony. as a new bride. You can't gag me when it is a question of naming our children."

The scene reached its climax soon after that. There was a volley of words from both sides. By nature I am hot-tempered, and I felt that a man had more rights than a woman, particularly in respect of a son. I alluded to the legend of Parashuram who cut off the head of his own mother in obedience to the command of his father. That sparked her off.

"You can do the same to me," she shrieked "I don't expect anything better."

That night we slept with our backs to each other. I was so mad. that I got up and separated my bed from hers. The next day matters came to a head and she left for her mother's house, taking the children with her. I did not care two hoots. For full five weeks she stayed with her mother, and I made no move for reconciliation. Then her brother brought her back on the pretext that he was taking his mother and sister on a pilgrimage.

"So? I'll pay you for my wife's ticket and upkeep," I said sarcastically. "Why not take her along?"

"It is not that," the brother replied apologetically, "It's the children, you see. It would be too hard on the little one."

My father and mother intervened, or else I would have told him something more.

I don't recollect exactly now, but I think it was quiet some time before our beds came together again. But my wife seemed to have learnt the lesson of her life. Never did she again have the temerity to call her son Kishore. It was just "darling", "dear" or "Lal". Neighbours called him "Baba", meaning "young boy", and that solved the problem for all for the time being.

Today's incident of registration in a school rekindled the old fire in me. She had deliberately trodden on my toes and I was not going to take it lying down. I told her I would go to the school and have the name changed. I had had my dinner, otherwise I would have shown her my anger by refusing to eat.

The next morning, I went straight to the school, confident that it could be easily managed. But the Head Mistress was a cussed woman, hard as nails.

"I am sorry but the name can't be changed now," she said. It has been entered in the school register."

I pleaded with her.

"But what is your objection to the name Kishore?" she asked. "In any case, if you object to it so strongly, bring me an application signed both by you and your wife. Then I can do it," she said.

"But I am the boy's father, madam," I protested.

"And she is his mother," she flung at me. "She has given one name, and now you want to give another. Tomorrow you will change your mind again and — it just cannot be done."

I came out of her room crest-fallen. In the verandah I met my son who had come out of class for a drink of water. He came and clung to me.

"Don't tell your mother that I came to your school," I whispered to him. "If you keep quiet about it I'll get you lots of toys to play with."

"All right," he replied beaming.

"It was late for office already so I decided to miss it for the day. But I couldn't go back home either. I wandered about the whole day, visiting places, going to a cinema show, and the public library. I returned home at the usual time of the evening, and was greeted with a question.

"Why did the lunch basket come back?" asked my wife.

"I didn't feel like having lunch," I said.

"You did not feel like having it or you did not attend the office?" she probed further.

"That is none of your business," I replied curtly.

Lal was approaching. He had returned from school. He was about to speak, so I put a chocolate in his mouth. While changing clothes I spoke to him.

"Which name do you like son? Kishore or Shrikant?"

My wife pricked up her ears.

"See that you don't tell a lie," she warned him with a steely look.

"Don't you like the name Kishore?"

The boy showed signs of fear. His lips trembled. I picked him up at once to comfort and reassure him.

"Don't be afraid son. No one dare touch you as long as I am here. Just tell — would you not like to be called Shrikant? Come, whisper it to me."

"Yes," he said.

My wife heard, and gave him a nasty look. He got demoralized and somersaulted.

"No, no," he said. "I think I prefer Kishore, *Dada*.*"

Looking at me he saw my disappointment, and tried to clear the hurdle by saying. "Oh. I like both names equally well."

"Oh, go on," I said, "silly son of a silly mother."

After dinner I paced about the house. When I went into the bedroom, I found my wife in bed. I tried to draw my bed apart, but the darned thing wouldn't move. I looked under it and found the legs of both beds tied up with a strong cord. I smiled. I got into my bed and turned away from her. She laughed and put her arm round me.

"What a child you are though father of two kids!" she remarked. "Perverse like a child. What influence will it have on the children?"

"They will take after you all right, you have suckled them," I said.

After some time spent in sweet banter, I fell asleep. In the morning I gave her an application to sign. She quietly tore it up and threw the paper bits out from the balcony, turned up her nose and walked away. I wished I had taken advantage of her mood the previous night and made her sign it then. Soon she returned holding a bit of paper.

"Here, take this, master of the house!" she said with sweet blandishment.

I took a close look at it. It was the receipt for school fees paid. The name Kishore was scored out and Shrikant entered instead, the alteration being attested by the Head Mistress.

I grinned and put my arms round her.

"But when did you visit the school?" I asked in surprise.

"Oh, I got there soon after you had left," she replied. "So, now you've had your way, and are pleased, I hope?"

"Look, Nimu darling," I said. "If you aren't happy, I'll go and get the name changed again."

*Initially used for elder brother, sometimes the term is used for father

"I was only testing you," she replied. "Our happiness as wives lies in the husband's happiness."

"That is why we husbands are ready to die for you," I replied, cuddling her.

(Translated by T. H. Advani)

VERSES

(Harikant)

1. *BESTOW on me the power of endurance as great as the calamities
You send,
So that I may not lose the faith I have in You;
Or, fill me with such fervour that I may take joy in sorrow.
Bestow on me the power of endurance as great as the calamities
You send.
Bestow on me the will to challenge tyranny
So that I may not bow the head that has never bowed before,
Bestow on me the power of endurance as great as the calamities
You send,
So that I may not lose the faith I have in You.*
2. *Though I have not met You yet
I feel that I have known You from the beginning of time;
It is midnight, morning is far,
And yet I have not come face to face with You,
Neither has acquaintance sprung up between us, nor any talk,
Even then I cannot say that I do not know You.
Though I have not met You yet,
I feel that I have known You from the beginning of time.*
3. *What I did not achieve in reality, I obtained in dreams—
How nice it would have been if the dreams had been reality and
reality a dream !
If the flower of hope bloomed, it bloomed in dreams,
If hope was not fulfilled in reality, it came in dreams,
And if the heart's wound healed, it healed in dreams,
Because life, having a cure, denied it.
What I did not achieve in reality, I obtained in dreams
How nice it would have been if the dreams had been reality and
reality a dream !*

4. *Life would have passed somehow, as it passes now,
Only, with You here I would have passed the time smiling:
The silly heart would have beaten fast as now it beats fast,
Life would have passed somehow, as it passes now.
Moonlight would have shone in beauty somehow, as now it
shines,
Only, if You had been here, I would have offered its beauty as
a sacrifice at the altar of your loveliness.
Life would have passed somehow, as it passes now,
Only, with You here I would have passed the time smiling*

(Translated by T. H. Advani)

SONI AND THE FLOOD

(*Goverdhan Mahboobani 'Bharati'*)

REACHING the railway embankment I looked around. There was nothing but water as far as the eye could see, turbid water of the flood. A mile from where I stood, I saw my small village of Arazi surrounded by water.

All the land and cultivation had been swallowed up. The ears of corn bobbed up and down as the water heaved. The tops of trees showed above the water here and there, and on some of these perched pigeons, crows and sparrows, looking forlorn and silent. From some branches hung snakes, on others could be seen huge lizards, all these creatures having sought safety high up in the trees.

I was mute with astonishment as I looked around. Only a few days ago I had walked through the fields and open spaces of Arazi over the narrow paths to go up to the town of Talti. There had been a rumour then that the embankment of the great river had breached, and the water was rushing towards our village. A few bold young men had walked to the village on the Ilashahi canal to ascertain the situation. They saw in the far distance only a thin streak of water. They had laughed: "Subahan Allah! Do they call that a flood! That thing would not fill the largest pit in our village." On their return they had told the other villagers disdainfully that they should not worry. That thing was no flood. It was nothing but a water drain. It would help to fill up the dried up hollows in the village and provide welcome water. Their village was perfectly safe, built as it was on high ground. That put the minds of all villagers at ease and I too went to Talti relieved of anxiety.

In our boarding house in Talti, the next day, however, there was great commotion. Eedu Daba woke me up from sleep. "Get up, young Diwan, your village is under water. God alone can help now!" I was startled and could not believe my ears. Surprised, I asked: "What are you saying, Eedu? I left my village only yesterday. Do you mean that in a night....."

"I am coming from there and I have seen it with my eyes, young Diwan! I swear by my children. I first learnt of it at dawn as I drove the cattle to the station. I could hardly believe it. In the town here we have been saved by the railway embankment, otherwise the water would have reached this place, too, long ago."

Quickly I washed myself and hurried in the direction of my village. As I came to the end of the wide road and climbed up the embankment I stood stunned! This side of the railway embankment, the land was dry. On the other side there was nothing but water stretching endlessly. I do not remember how long I stood there looking at the muddy water. The homes and huts of hundreds of villagers lay submerged in it. Suddenly a woman's kind voice broke in on my ears: "Where have you to go, my lad?" A few yards away, touching the railway embankment, a boat had reached with two persons in it. One was a well-featured and finely-built woman, rather sad looking, her hands on the oar, the other a man, parched and black of face who showed no trace of concern, as he sat at the stern smoking a hubble-bubble. As I sat in the boat, I took a good look at both. The woman was about thirty years old, nut-brown and attractive. It is difficult for me even now to say how old the man might have been. As her husband he could have been forty, but his body was so shrunken and sickly that he looked very much older. The cheek-bones from his face and the ribs from his chest showed prominently. The woman plied the oar with her long shapely arms and addressed me again: "Where have you to go, young one?"

"To the village opposite," I replied.

The boat veered towards the station. Impatiently I asked, "Why to the station? It is to the village opposite....."

The hint of a smile appeared on her sad face. Calmly she replied, "It is to the village opposite we are going. The current on this side is strong; we will turn round from where the station is."

I understood and said nothing. The oar beat the water rhythmically. My gaze was fixed on my village. At the station Yusuf Chandyo joined us—a tall, hefty and handsome young man who worked as a coolie. He would put his two hands to a sack weighing little lamb, and walk with the load for half a mile without stopping two and a half maunds, swing it over on to his back as if it was a

for breath. No sooner had he sat in the boat than he plunged into an account of what had happened. "It is the very limit, young sir! Up to last evening no one had even an inkling of it. Suddenly it came, like a bolt from the blue. At first it was a mere trickle, but by mid-day a roaring flood had arrived. The men lost heart and cried, 'Allah protect us.' Fortunately Arazi is on high ground, otherwise nothing would have been left of the village. Young Diwan, no one had a wink of sleep all night. And how could sleep come to anyone either? In the dark nothing could be seen, but the roaring of water was heard all the time. I am told that the cattle-pen along with all the cattle belonging to herdsman Peru was swept away. The mud houses of many weavers have tumbled down. The temple of Hanuman built by Shah Pursh, the temple of Shiva raised by Dame Kaki, the mosque erected by the blacksmith—all these are under water. In our area, young sir, not a roof remains....."

I did not remember what else Yusuf had said at that time, because sometimes I was listening to his grim details and sometimes I kept witlessly gazing at the village.

Suddenly the boat received a nasty jerk.

I screamed.

Yusuf also gave a shout and leaped over into the water.

I would have been flung out but two strong and soft arms held me firmly. The skeleton at the stern, recovering his balance, spoke in a gruff voice, "Why are you afraid? Underneath there must be a culvert or something like it." The next instant, with great composure he got out of the boat. The water reached up to his waist only. The woman also put down the oar and jumped into the water. She confirmed that it was a bridge and they both pushed hard. Yusuf too helped. The boat slipped back into the water and the three of them climbed back into the boat, their clothes partly wet. The bundle of bones had a loin cloth tied to his waist. With water dripping from it, he went back to the stern and to his hubble-bubble. The woman squeezed the water from her wet *salwar* and *kurtā*.* Yusuf took off his shirt wrung the water out of it and spread it near the prow to dry. As I sat hunched up like a frightened rabbit, the woman and

*Woman's trousers and shirt

Yusuf happened to look at me. They both laughed. Yusuf went forward and took the oar.

"You look after the young Sahib," he said to the woman, "I will ply the boat. He is a pet nephew of the school headmaster. If he complains to him, it would go hard with me." The woman smiled and looked at me, and then she turned her eyes to Yusuf, as if to say, "Very well," She came and sat near me, wet clothes clinging to her limbs and water still dripping from them.

She put an arm round my shoulder and asked me with a smile, "You are not afraid, are you?"

In reply I simply heaved a deep sigh.

"What is your name?" she asked.

"Girdhari. And yours?"

She laughed sweetly and said, "My name? Of what particular use are our names?"

"But.....surely, you have a name?"

"Soni." she replied.

"What did you say? Soni?"

She nodded in assent and flung a smiling look at the strong bare body of Yusuf.

Yusuf, hand on oar, and mouth agape, had been looking at Soni. Soni tightened her arm around me. My cheeks began to feel the wet chill of her clothes.

"Where had you gone from the village?" She asked next.

"To Talti. I study there. In the village I finished the three English standards. For further studies I stay at Talti. Where are you from?"

"From around Manchhur lake."

"What brought you here?"

"We were carried by the flood. The flood brought us here. Where could we go? Manchhur has no boundaries now. It overflowed and for miles around it is one sheet of water."

The boat was now approaching the habitation of Shah Saheb. Yusuf handed back the oar to Soni, slipped on his half-dry shirt and said, "I shall get off here."

Soni plied the oar. Yusuf took a two-anna bit out of the tuck of his *Salwar* and put it in Soni's hand. Soni looked at it disdain-

fully and returned the money to him saying, "Let it be. You worked the oar, did you not?"

"But the boat is yours," Yusuf countered.

"Neither mine nor yours. It belongs to the river-god, I too belong to him." She took a handful of the flood water, kissed it, and then touched it with her eyes as a mark of reverence for the elemental god.

Both laughed. Yusuf tucked it back at the *salwar* string and said, "As you wish."

"Come sometimes and give a helping hand," she said, casting a glance in the direction of the stern. "It is difficult to ply the boat single handed."

I saw that her skeleton of husband had put aside the brazier of the hubble-bubble and was sleeping soundly, snoring away.

"I will certainly come," Yusuf answered as he left.

Soni gave a deep sigh. Then she turned to me and asked, "Where do you get off?"

"Near Khaki Shah Pir's burial place. My house is close by it."

The boat reached the elevation near Khaki Shah Pir. Then I suddenly remembered that I had come away in my night clothes and did not have a pie on me.

I felt embarrassed and asked, "Would you accompany me home, Soni, so that I can pay you the fare?"

She laughed lightly and embraced me. "It is a small matter. Don't worry about the payment."

"Oh! How can that be?" I asked, "You need money to live!" I replied.

"So young and so wise, aren't you?" So saying she buried me in her arms. Her eyes closed. She seemed overpowered by a strange emotion. Suddenly she kissed my cheeks.

"Tch.....tch.....what is this you are doing?" I said, a little put out. I wiped my cheeks on my shoulders and freed myself from her embrace. She opened her eyes. Tears tickled down from them and reached her mouth. There was a movement at her throat and she drew in her lips. It was as if she was taking in the bitter taste of life with those tears.

I was moved in a way I could not then understand.

Gently I said, "All right, Soni, you wait here and I will run home and bring you a two-anna piece."

As I entered the house, my grandmother was filled with joy and took me in her lap. I touched my uncle's feet and he said, "Oh! you have come? Thank God, your grandmother was in jitters."

I said, "Uncle, please let me have a two-anna piece. I will go and give it to Soni and come back."

"Soni?.....Which Soni?" he asked, taken aback and rising from his seat.

My uncle Hassaram was an exceedingly strict person, a very strange man. He was always suspicious of women. He used to say: "Woman is the cause of man's weakness." That is why he had not married. He was headmaster of the village school and also in charge of the village post office.

All the villagers as well as the school children stood in awe of my uncle. He used to say: "Morality and dignity are two great virtues in a man." He was always stressing these two words—morality and dignity, dignity and morality. His reaction therefore was not unnatural, not anything to be surprised at. But I was scared, particularly when I suddenly saw Soni standing outside the door. Before uncle could take a step in her direction, she had said. "Salaam, good sir." Uncle scowled and threw a two-anna piece before her. "Here, take this," he said curtly. Soni paid no heed to the coin. She had fixed her fond gaze on me.

"What are you staring at?" uncle demanded. "Pick up the coin and be off with you!"

Tears swam into Soni's eyes and grandma was quick to see them. She rebuked him. "Have you no sense Hassa? Is that the way to speak to a woman and a stranger?"

Realising his mistake uncle felt embarrassed and recovered himself. After all, he was a headmaster, very wise and clever. He smiled at once and assumed a kindly manner. "Er.....oh, where is your boat Soni? And where is your husband? We should like to use your boat for two hours a day to carry the mail back and forth between the station and post office. Do you think you could do this work? You would be paid Rs. 10 per month."

By this clever move, uncle had saved the situation and turned his defeat into a triumph.

Anyhow, for me it was a wonderful chance to sail in her boat. Every time she went to the station with the postman and mail bag, I was with her. Sometimes Yusuf would come over and lend her a hand if he was free.

Several days passed. Gradually Soni's boat became for me a golden boat of love. My feet were always being drawn to it.

Now I began to spend a great deal of my time with Soni. I would share with her her simple meal consisting of cakes of *bajra* or *jowar* and spinach, or occasionally it would be fish, and after the mid-day meal I would have my siesta also in the boat. My grandma did not approve of this and used to yell out at me. "You eat from the hands of an illiterate rustic woman and will grow to be a clod-pole like her." She would threaten to complain to uncle. "Why don't you talk to the lad, Hassa? His mind is not in his studies. In the company of a fisherwoman he will grow up to be a fisherman himself. Are we going to let that happen without doing anything about it?" When uncle heard this he was very angry and kept his eye on me. For a day or two I stayed at home and attended to my studies. But soon it was the same story—Soni and her boat, Soni and her cakes of *bajra* or *jowar* and her tastefully roasted fish.

How vividly I remember one incident! It was a full-moon night. There was to be devotional singing all night long in the temple of Hanuman. Grandma and uncle had gone there too. We youngsters were playing the game of *kabaddi* outside the temple. Suddenly Soni's boat drifted up to the landing. Abandoning the game, I ran and climbed into the boat. Soni's thin and wizened husband Ramzan was sleeping near his hubble-bubble. The full moon had thrown a lovely silver belt on the water and we sailed in its direction as if in a game of chase. Slowly the boat advanced towards the broad silver sheet which however kept receding. As we neared the broken-down temple of Hanuman, Soni stopped the boat, laid aside the oar and took me into her lap. "Girdhari, my boy, have you no mother?"

"No.....I do not even remember her."

"And father?"

"He lives away from here." For quite a while we were both silent. Suddenly I said, "Soni, may I ask you something?"

"Ask, by all means," she replied.

"You love me very much, don't you?"

She did not reply. Instead she held me tight.

I persisted. "Tell me Soni what makes you love me so much?"

"Say nothing. just lie quietly, close to me", she whispered. She stroked my hair and kissed me tenderly.

But I insisted on knowing and said, "If you don't tell me, I will get out of the boat."

"Get out? In the water?" she asked, cuddling me tightly and kissing my eyes this time.

"Then I won't talk to you," I sulked. "Why do you always look at me like that?"

"Like what?" she questioned smiling.

"As you are looking at me now."

"I'll tell you. You are so much like my Gulan," she said.

"Which Gulan?"

She closed her eyes and seemed to choke. My curiosity got the better of me and again I insisted on knowing. "Tell me, Soni, tell—who was Gulan?"

"He was.....my son.....as you are my son."

"As I am? What, am I your son?"

She merely nodded.

"But what happened to Gulan? Where did he go?"

She bent her head over mine and with her mouth pressed against it, she tried to suppress her sobs. I put my arms round her neck and said, "Don't cry, Soni. Why, did Gulan die then?"

Again she replied only by nodding.

"How.....What happened, Soni?"

She broke into a fit of loud sobbing. I will not describe, I cannot describe, what happened. But the incident on that full moon night will remain in my memory all my life. Sometimes even now I feel that I am a small boy and Soni is pressing me to her bosom and sobbing uncontrollably, the flood of her warm tears coursing down my neck.

As we were returning, she told me that Gulan was her firstborn, a bonny baby but very peevish. When he cried it was difficult to stop him. His father Ramzan found an easy way to silence him. Being an opium smoker himself, he would rub a little of that dread narcotic into the child's milk. As a result, the boy gradually wasted away and one day never awoke from his sleep. For eleven years Soni's motherly lap had remained empty. The opium had not only taken away her son but also destroyed all her future hopes.

Ramzan would often beat her when intoxicated. One day there was a violent quarrel between them. He beat and kicked her. He had asked for money to buy opium and she had refused to pay. So he sized her by her hair, dragged and brought her down and started mauling her. Soni did not utter a word. She did not hit back in self-defence. It had happened in the presence of uncle and we had gone to Soni's rescue. Uncle smacked Ramzan's face hard and said, "Shame on you, you boor! How can you hit an innocent woman?"

"You call her innocent?" replied Ramzan. "This daughter of a dog is innocent? Damned bitch!" He dribbled at the corners of his mouth.

Uncle slapped the fellow hard again. "What foolish talk is this, you scoundrel?"

"I am telling the truth, hundred per cent truth," he said. "The whole day she and Yusuf have a jolly time together in the boat. Ha! She thinks I do not know."

We were stunned. Uncle went back home at once. How could he stand by a woman who had no moral character? The next day he took away from her the work of carrying the mail. Sternly he warned me against visiting that woman again.

I dared not say anything to uncle, but decided to punish Ramzan. One night he had gone out to the village bazaar to buy opium. With a number of my companions I waited for him in a dark lane. As he neared we fell upon him and beat him up so badly that his head started bleeding.

The next day, defying uncle's orders, I went to Soni, hoping to win her favour by telling her what I had done. I saw that Ramzan was laid up with fever and Soni was nursing him. She had covered his forehead with a damp cloth to bring down his temperature. She

was startled to see me and said immediately, "Better go back Girdhari, my boy. If your uncle sees you he will flay you alive." In great misery she added, "I am an ill-starred woman. Girdhari, I am utterly alone. Never have I found happiness in life. See what my husband has done. He went out last night inebriated and must have had a fall and hit his head against something." I saw the opportunity I was looking for and boasted, "Last night it was I who beat him up, he did not fall and hit himself against anything."

"What.....What did you say? Why.....?"

"Why did he beat you the other day for no reason? If he beats you I will beat him."

I was hoping that Soni would pat me on the back but instead she slapped my face hard. I was stunned. Harshly she said to me, "Go away from here you ill-mannered boy! I do not wish to see your face again!"

Where could I go? I had no mother, and father was away. uncle was severe, and grandmother was engaged all the time in religious ritual. Therefore, even after being slapped by Soni I turned to her, hid my face in her lap, sobbing. She softened. Her motherly love woke up again. She dried my tears, kissed me and said, "Never do such a foolish thing again. Good boy. Go—go home now, because if your uncle comes to know he will....."

I returned home leaving behind a deeply dejected Soni, with a sick and unconscious husband to tend to. Ramzan soon died and rested in his grave. The water of the flood was now receding. It was as if it had been defeated in its attack on the elevated ground on which our village was built, and so decided to retreat. But as the waters receded, it left behind an epidemic of fever. I was laid up in bed for several days and could not go out. I had a hard time of it, what with the ache in my limbs, the restlessness, the bitter potions, the lonesomeness. The only persons around me were a stern uncle and an old grandmother. One day I heard their conversation about certain main roads being opened up once again and she happened to remark to my uncle that all the fishermen were returning with their boats to their places but Soni, according to her information, was still sticking on. She asked him if he knew why.

"Let her be, how does it concern us?" he said.

"But, my dear, when all the water has receded. is she going to carry the boat on her shoulder?"

"Why will she carry it on her shoulder?" he remarked acidly. "She has Yusuf."

Timidly grandma put in, "But Soni does not appear to be that type, Hassa."

"There is no trusting a fisherwoman," he said with finality.

Grandma remained silent. But I felt furious with uncle. I decided that as soon as I was well and able to go out, I would go and tell Soni what people were saying about her and that it would be better if she returned to her village. But when I was well, grandma would not let me out. "Not before I go and light an earthen lamp and place it before the image of Kali, and place a new sheet over the grave of Shah Pir," she said. "You will not step out before that."

That evening grandma performed the rituals but when she went to the tomb of Shah Pir, she saw Soni there. Soni had placed her head at the foot of the grave and was crying. When she saw grandma she enquired after me. "How is Girdhari, grandmother?" she asked.

"What have you to do with Girdhari?" my grandmother said to her dryly. She placed a new sheet over Pir's grave and started to pray.

When she removed the sheet from the grave and turned to go back home, Soni spoke to grandma again. "I am returning to Manchhur today, grandmother. I beg of you to let me see Girdhari's face just once before I leave?"

A kind of caprice or wickedness took hold of grandmother. "What good will it do you to see Girdhari's face?" she taunted her. "Go and see Yusuf's face!" Soni felt as if she had been struck with a sword and cut into two. Hoarsely she replied, "Grandmother, you too can say such a thing?"

"Am I saying what is not true?" grandma retorted. "Why are you here yet when all others of your caste have returned to their homes?"

Soni's tears flowed endlessly. Quietly she replied, "Grandmother, when I came here I met Girdhari. I felt somehow that I had got back my own son Gulan. I see now that that was not to be, and I have to return without even my husband. What should I do with

Yusuf? He used to lend a hand and I paid him money for it. I have been waiting here only to see Girdhari whom I have come to love as my own. Here I pray for him every day that God may make him well again."

"Quiet, woman! You are lying," grandma said to her harshly.

"No, grandmother," Soni went on, "I swear by myself, by Shah Pir!" So saying she put both her hands on the grave of Shah Pir. The gesture was an eye-opener for grandma. It was as if she saw things clearly in a flood of light. She trembled from head to foot and perceived the whole truth about Soni. A little scared of the oath by the grave of Shah Pir which Soni had taken, grandma said to her, "Do not swear by the Pir, Soni! I do believe you and apologise. You really are Soni*, pure as gold."

When grandma came back home she told uncle everything. "Hassa, my son, Soni may be a fisherwoman but she has a heart of gold," she said. "She is standing outside and wishes to see Girdhari before going away." Uncle lost his temper and went out roaring, "Go away from here, evil woman, and do not come to this door again." Soni knew the harsh temper of uncle. Quickly, gravely she said to him, "I am going, sir, and I will not come back, I assure you. Only, just once....."

"No, never!" said uncle. "Go back immediately you immoral woman."

Soni's self-respect asserted itself. "You seem to think you hold a monopoly of good manners, headmaster *sahib*, don't you?" she flung at him. "I am after all only a fisherwoman. But what about your own manners?" She turned round and left. Grandma called after her, "Soni!.....Soni!" But Soni did not stop. Just before leaving she had flung a small bundle at grandma's feet.

With trembling hands grandma picked up the bundle and brought it to me. "Perhaps this is for you, Girdhari," she said.

I opened the bundle. It contained a few lotus roots, tubers and other lake products which children eat with relish. At the bottom of the bundle was a small red shirt.....a child's shirt.

*"Soni" golden, from Sona meaning gold

I understood at once that this was the shirt Gulam had worn. Tears dimmed my eyes. But from fear of uncle, I immediately wiped them with that red shirt.

(Translated by T. H. Advani)

AJANTA

(Mohan Kalpana)

*THE mountain caves of Ajanta
Are pages from history
In the form of art,
In part impaired and part unmarred,—
Gifts replete with art from an age that was.
The age of the Buddha and his philosophy
Looks out through the veil of a mountain
And silently calls, "Come,
I will show you the face of time
Which because it is past
Seems dead in the present."*

*O I see it is alive
In the caves of Ajanta,
Its light shining still through the eyes
And smiling lips of the Buddha.
The lines of endurance and understanding on his brow
Speak of life's enigmas,
Of man's long penance and meditation,
And convey the message of non-attachment,
Of dispassion.*

*Fixing my gaze on these rocks,
On these caves
And Ajanta,
I see the face of time,
Changeless, potent, placid,
And my mind takes flight
Into regions strange and inscrutable,
And returning, it is filled with regret
That we battle and die for trifles,
Self-esteeming,*

*Seeking esteem from others,
Drunk with ego,
The world's larger life without a meaning for us,
The petty personal being all-in-all.*

*There a Buddha stands
Free from attachment,
A colossal symbol of universal good,
Drawing the mind to himself and endowing it with his own peace.
Sculptured here are chronicles
Which the storm and stress of time could not obliterate.
It is as if the time that was
Touched the feet of the Buddha and became
The Golden Age of mankind
And eternally one with him.
It stands before my eyes
Alive even in stone.
Blessed stone!*

*I have known those to whom Fate served nothing but stones,
Here I see the stone in Ajanta favoured by Fate,
The rock-stone turned into a philosopher's stone
To transmute the base in man,
Silently standing
In the caves of Ajanta,
Sculptured by art
In the form of the Buddha.*

*I shall touch your feet
O stone, and hear the heart-beats of time,
The beats that must have run faster
At the sound of the Buddha's approaching feet.
Hearing its heart-beats.
I shall feel the presence of the Buddha
The Yogi, Sanyasi,
Ascetic, the Enlightened One,
With power of deep thought,
Sitting in lotus posture
In union with the Infinite.*

*Ah, this smile of the Buddha
 Casts a spell on the mind
 With its depths like the depths of the sea,
 Sweetness of ambrosia,
 Proverbial sweetness of the waters of the Ganges,
 Of the Nectar of Immortality churned from the Ocean of Milk
 Storied in the Bhagavata*
 And over which had fought demons and deities.
 For a flicker it seems the smile of Mona Lisa
 From here was purloined.*

*The Buddha here is above attachment
 And yet how he draws the mind in attachment to him !
 Strange contradiction !
 And yet who will admit it is a contradiction !
 They alone are deathless to this day
 Who gave in the past, gave and gave,
 They bind us to them,
 Themselves above attachment, unbound,
 And that is the secret of immortality,
 The truth about greatness,
 And Ajanta is the house of truth,
 The house of greatness,
 In art and sculpture.*

*Here is a world of the Buddha apart,
 Hidden in the heart of a hill,
 Far from human habitation, in a barren wasteland,
 In which are carved a hundred tales,
 Tales of Yakshas,** of Gandharvas,@
 Of Rati the goddess of Beauty, and Madan the god of Love,
 Of deities too,
 And of the wild elephant
 Who with perfect self-control
 In gnawing hunger*

*A Hindu scripture

** tribe of Supernatural beings in Hindu mythology

@ celestial musicians

*Touched not a morsel though a feast was spread before him,
Remembering that he was a son
And his father was without food.
His mother too,
And both were blind and oppressed with hunger
Far out in the jungle,
Not able to find food or their son,
And the son had not taken food or water,
But he touched not the feast that was laid before him !*

*That is a tale in graphic colours
In the life-story of the Buddha,
The story of his own liberation in Nirvana,
Of how he came and stood
With a beggar's bowl in hand
Before his wife and child.
The story of the Buddha
Here in reclining posture,
His hand supporting his face,
In communion with himself.
There are stories too of pious and holy men,
Of monks and mendicants,
Of people at large,
Of all and sundry,
But the story at the centre of all
Is the story of the Buddha.*

*Strange is the phenomenon
Of the Buddha in lotus posture—
From the right he seems to smile,
From the left he looks as though he suffered,
And from the front, the face is calm and dispassionate.
It is a masterpiece in sculpture
This Buddha with three expressions.
Other masterpieces abound
Scores of objects, beauty aids,
On female figures
In Ajanta—*

*Strange raiment and drapery,
 Unique ornaments,
 Hair curling and coiled,
 Cunningly contrived coloured beads
 That seem precious stones and pearls
 In the reddish light of the lamp.
 Oh, such deception
 Is worth a hundred real pearls,
 Deception by coloured stone beads,
 And I could well believe the colours to have been made
 From real pearls !*

*It is strange that in such a world of beauty
 He remains still unattached,
 He who came to be called Lord Buddha,
 The very centre of all attraction !*

*The immortal mantra
 "Buddham Sharanam Gachhami"[†]
 Calls me to the feet of the Buddha,
 And I prostrate myself at your feet O Buddha,
 Great Soul, Good Soul,
 Lord of Truth and Justice.
 Right before me, small and insignificant,
 You are a world in yourself,
 The very Cosmos,
 Hidden in the heart of a mountain,
 In sculptured art.*

(Translated by T. H. Advani)

[†] 'I surrender to the Buddha'

TELL ME A STORY

(*Gobind Malhi*)

MOHAN pressed me to go and spend the night with him. I thought it was a good idea and agreed readily.

There was a time when he and I had been friends and constant companions. At home, at school or out of doors, we were mostly together. Being neighbours and of the same age, we had grown up in each other's company since childhood till we passed the matriculation examination.

Thereafter, I joined college at Karachi, but Mohan's father being a man of modest means could not afford higher education for his son. Mohan took up government service as a clerk in our home town, and we soon drifted away from each other.

Now we were meeting after years, not in Sind but at Ahmedabad, and by chance. During the intervening period how much had happened! Mohan had risen to be a head clerk. I had, on the other hand, entered the vortex of literary and social activity which spelt an unsettled life, keeping me on the move all the time. As we sat in the bus, Mohan asked me if I had married.

I smiled. "I don't feel quite settled down yet," I replied. "If I married I would not be able to give my wife the attention and company she would naturally expect."

Mohan was somewhat puzzled but before he could say anything I remarked, "I suppose you are married?"

The puzzled look on his face at once gave place to one of happiness.

Beaming, he replied, "I am a father too, my dear chap. My daughter is now five years old. I would have sent you an invitation for the wedding but it was a time when our people were clearing out of Sind as a result of the Partition. It was difficult to keep in touch with all one's friends and relatives." Seriously he added, "You would not have attended it anyway."

"What makes you think so?"

"My dear chap, have you any time for anything except writing and speech-making?" he remarked mischievously.

I tried to smile.

As we stepped into the verandah of his house, his little daughter came out running and put her arms round her father's legs. "Daddy, did you bring the cows from Pakistan?" she asked.

Mohan turned to me with a smile and explained. "Our neighbour bought a cow yesterday. So she must have one too! To put her off, I told her we had left our cows behind in Pakistan. She insisted that I go and bring them."

I had a good laugh.

"Daddy, did you bring the cows?" The little girl asked again.

Mohan lowered himself on his toes, put her little arms round his neck and replied, "I shall bring them tomorrow, darling; just now meet uncle. Come, say *Namaste*"*

The child turned to me, and putting her hands together said, "*Namaste*, uncle".

My hands involuntarily went to her. I lifted her in my arms and with a smile asked her name.

"Rekha," she replied. "Mummy calls me Rekharani."

I pressed her to me and kissed her.

Mohan was standing by.

"My friend, marriage means bondage no doubt, but it has its compensations," he observed.

I was unable to reply. Gently I put the child down and she ran inside. My eyes followed her in.

Mohan must have understood the state of my mind because he remarked, "My father used to say, 'When we have teeth, there is no *halwa* :** when there is halwa, the teeth are gone'."

My eyes were still in the direction where Rekha had disappeared.

Mohan asked me to go inside with him. I said I would sit out. In the verandah there was a string cot. Before I could step over and sit down, a young woman with her face partly veiled reached it with a cotton sheet and pillow in her hands.

*Hindu form of greeting with joined palms

**An Indian sweet, one variety of which needs considerable mastication

Mohan remonstrated with her about veiling before an old friend of his, who was like a brother to him.

His wife made no reply. Nor did she unveil her face. Silently, she spread the sheet over the cot with Mohan's help, put the pillow at one end and returned inside. Rekha, who had come out with her mother was looking at me all the time.

From the child's face I had judged that her mother must be a good looking woman. The mother's hands and feet showed that she must also have a fair complexion.

I sat down on the edge of the cot and Mohan went inside to change. Rekha came up to me with slow and hesitating steps. "May I show you my doll?" she asked.

"Yes," I replied with keen pleasure, "Do show it. Go and bring it."

Soon Mohan came out with a plate of sweets for me. Rekha took some time to fetch her doll. There were sounds of conversation between the child and her mother. When she came out she eagerly walked over to me, swinging her body from side to side.

I took the doll from her and said, "My! What a pretty doll!"

"Is she prettier than I am?" she asked innocently.

I was amused by her question.

"Oh, you are far prettier," I said, offering her a piece of sweet.

Rekha would not take it and retreated a little.

"Take it, darling, he is your uncle," Mohan said to her.

She accepted it then. "Will you tell me a story, uncle?" she asked.

I took hold of her hand and drew her to me.

"I don't know any stories," I said.

"Mummy says you know many."

"How does your Mummy know?" I asked.

"My wife is very fond of reading," Mohan put in.

"She has read more of your stories than I have."

I smiled and remarked, "What! Even then she covers her face before me?"

"She says she will not cover it next time you visit us and then she proposes also to discuss some of your stories with you."

"Why not today?"

Before Mohan could reply, Rekha had taken my hand and asked again, "Do tell me a story uncle."

"Not now, sweet child. I shall tell you one at bed-time," I answered.

"At bed-time, mummy will tell me a story. You tell me one now," she persisted.

"Tonight you will hear one from me instead."

"Then you will let me sleep by your side?"

I was amused.

"Every night she lies down by her mother's side to listen to a story and then she falls asleep," Mohan informed me.

I stroked her hair and replied, "I will, with pleasure, darling."

Throughout the evening Rekha kept reminding me of my promise.

At dinner time, Rekha's mother appeared again, and her face was covered even more.

Now I felt tantalized, eager to see the beautiful face not merely of the woman behind the veil but of the reader of my stories. I wanted to speak to her but could not muster enough courage.

The meal over, Mohan enquired if I would care to have a *paan**.

"No, thank you," I answered.

"I have got into the habit, and now without a *paan* I find it difficult to digest a meal. Come, let us go out for a stroll and buy a *paan* on the way," he entreated.

Rekha took her father's hand, and said, "Daddy, I will come with you."

"You two go along," I said, "I prefer to stay behind. I am not keen on a stroll."

"May we bring a *paan* for you, uncle?" Rekha asked.

"Very well, my darling," I replied.

I sat down on the edge of the cot.

After they had left, I was possessed by a strong desire to see the face of the woman who liked my stories, and also to speak a few words to her. So keen was the desire that I wished to go in and request her not to treat me as a stranger. But I was held back by the thought that it may not be proper to do so in the absence of my friend. My mind was still debating the propriety of such an action when I heard the voice of Rekha.

"Will you have a sweet *paan* or a plain one, uncle?"

*Betel leaf and arecanut

Startled. I looked behind. I saw Rekha running up the path and quite out of breath.

Quickly I replied, "A sweet one, please."

Rekha went back running.

Very soon Rekha's mother came out with a glass of milk in her hand for me. Her face was still veiled.

"I don't drink milk," I said to her.

She quietly turned round to go back.

"Bhabhi*, which story of mine did you like the most?" I ventured to ask with a smile. At the word "Bhabhi" she halted. After hearing the remaining words she walked away with quick steps without answering.

Now it was time to go to bed.

Rekha came over to my cot.

I moved to make room for her. "Uncle, begin the story," she said.

"Then you will sleep by me?"

"Yes, I have mummy's permission."

I lay flat on my back. She put her elbows on my chest, cupped her face in her small hands and fixed her eyes on me.

"Once upon a time, there was a Raja....." I paused.

"Go on."

"He used to eat Khaja**"

"Oh, no. That story I have heard many times!"

I thought for a while and came out with another.

"Once there was a king who had no children....."

"I have heard that one too from mummy."

I took time to think again.

"Come on, uncle, begin the story," she said.

I cleared my throat and started. "Once there was a king who had seven daughters....."

"I have heard that one too," she interrupted.

"I don't know any other story, my dear," I replied with a smile.

"But mummy says that you make your own stories."

*Brother's wife

**Cashew nuts

"I do, little one, but not about kings and queens, and surely you want to hear about kings and queens?"

Pat she replied, "Shall I tell you one?"

"Oh, that would be very nice," I said.

She began: "Once there was a small girl. She lived in a village in Pakistan. Uncle, Pakistan is very far, is it not?"

"Yes, very far, but go on with the story."

"One day a boy came there. His granny lived in the village." Rekha paused. "The boy and the girl used to play together. They played a game with dolls—the game of **adran dadrian*. Uncle, what game is *adran dadrian*?"

"Didn't you ask your mummy?"

"She said I should ask you."

"Right, I will tell you. Just as you make dolls marry in your play, so little boys and girls also played the game of marrying."

"Girls and boys become dolls? What happens afterwards?"

"Nothing. It is only play. Now, let's hear your story."

She waited to collect her words, and then continued. "In their play, the boy became the bridegroom and the girl became his bride. He told her he would marry her when he grew up. Uncle, what does 'marry' mean?"

"Why not ask your mummy?"

"Mummy won't tell me."

Finish the story and then I will tell you," I said.

"Every time the boy came to the village, he told her the same thing." She paused.

"What happened then?" I enquired involuntarily.

"He went to college. What is 'college', uncle?"

"Finish the story," I said a little impatiently.

"The boy forgot the girl."

"And then?"

"The girl waited in hope. What is 'hope' uncle?"

My face was in a sweat. I wiped it with a handkerchief and asked, "What happened afterwards?"

*Make-believe marriage

"The boy never came again and the girl's father and mother married her to some other boy." I felt suffocated and could not utter a word.

"The story is finished, uncle. Give me one anna for it," she said mischievously.

I tried to smile. "That is hardly a story," I returned.

"I said the same thing to mummy. It is a funny story. The boy and the girl do not marry. In a story they always do. I asked mummy what happened to the boy".

"And what did she say?" half choked I questioned the child.

She said, "The boy began to write books."

I sat up. I was like a man stung by a scorpion, every part of my body burning painfully.

Just then, Mohan came out. He noticed my agitated state and enquired if Rekha had been bothering me too much.

I wiped the perspiration from my face and asked, "Would a bus be going at this hour to the city?"

Mohan was puzzled. He looked at his watch and said, "It is half-past ten. The service would have stopped. But why?", he asked in astonishment.

"I am sorry, Mohan. I have just remembered. I have to meet somebody urgently. Would a taxi be available?"

Mohan's face showed great disappointment. "You promised to spend the night here," he reminded me.

"You see, the man will leave for Baroda early tomorrow morning," I lied.

I rose from the cot.

Tearfully, Rekha said to me, "Are you going away, uncle?"

"It is a misfortune to be a writer," Mohan remarked, looking at me sadly.

"Would you like to come with me, little one?" I asked Rekha.

"If mummy comes, I will come."

That was the last straw.

"I shall go and change," said Mohan, "We may find a taxi on Station Road."

He went inside.

I took Rekha in my arms and said to her, "Tell your mummy that if that boy had married the girl, the girl would have been very unhappy. Now she is far more happy."

From behind the door came a woman's voice, as if she spoke to herself.

"A woman's measure of happiness is different from a man's."

What could I have said ?

(Translated by T. H. Advani)

THE MINSTREL

(M. Kamal)

*WHAT will you gain by delving into life's mysteries,
O friend who are bitten by wisdom?
Come, come and sit down her. In some part of this neem tree's cool
shade*

*Cast aside all your paraphernalia of pain:
And this heavy load of wisdom too—take it off your head.
From your heart's garment shake off the dust of your illusions.
At least for today, O friend, surrender yourself for a while to the com-
pany of intoxicated souls.*

*Loosen your knotted tresses of anxiety and wash them clean and smooth
In the flowing waters of joyous exaltation.*

*Full of old wine
Is the flask that is near you—
The symbol of overcoming your troubles.
Quaff off the first cup at one gulp.*

*Then, when I strike and stir up the strings of my instrument,
It is a challenge to you to burst forth into song to keep them company.*

(Translated by T. H. Advani)

THE BRAHMIN'S WIFE

(Assanand Mamtara)

ALL her friends referred to her as "cowherdess" though, of course, not in her presence. She was not a cowherdess by occupation. Her husband owned two or three cows. Their milk was his only source of income.

Her name was not Kiki either. It was her pet name, meaning little girl. She was hardly twelve when her parents married her off to a 25-year old Brahmin. Because she had a delicate constitution, her parents-in-law, in the first days of her marriage, called her Kiki. The name, very common in Sind, stuck to her.

Her husband was Brahmin in name only. He had no knowledge of the Hindu scriptures.

At first he lived on fees paid to every Brahmin by his *Yajmans*.* They fed him well on auspicious days, and the cash gifts enabled him to live comfortably. After the First World War, however, life ceased to run smoothly for him. Whether people were losing faith in religious rites or there was some other cause, it was difficult to say, but the ugly fact remained that his income was dwindling. Since he was utterly uneducated, having learnt neither his own time-honoured language and literature, nor any modern vocation which might help him in life, he had taken to the common mode of eking out a living by keeping a few cows.

Kiki was now eighteen. Youth had flowered in her rather late, perhaps because of her delicate body. But on reaching that age she experienced a sudden upsurge of emotions and physical sensations. Unfortunately, before these sweet and tender impulses were aroused, she had to fulfil conjugal obligations. Of course, one might ask what was the need or use of those impulses and sentiments in a life such as hers. These have to be nurtured in an atmosphere of refinement and culture. The place where she lived was totally devoid of these.

She had hardly spent a year or two in a tornado of new emotions when her attitude towards her husband began to change imperceptibly.

*Hereditary followers

She felt an aversion to his crude and uncultured ways. When she heard him speak to anyone harshly or abusively like a low-bred person she felt humiliated, as if someone had cut off her nose. When he came and lay beside her at night, there emanated from him in endless waves a nauseating smell of cow-dung. It was nothing new. She had lived with this smell for years. But now that her emotions were awakened, she became hypersensitive and felt suffocated. She tried to remonstrate with herself. To a Hindu wife, her husband had to be like a god. However ugly, deformed or immoral he might be, the scriptures enjoined on the wife the duty to love him, to attend on him and to consider him above all other men in all respects. This feeling was ingrained in her since her childhood. Behind it lay centuries of honoured tradition.

She remembered this injunction, administered daily in diverse ways, and tried hard to conform to the tradition and thus restore peace to her mind. She did not fail in her duties and continued to study her husband's pleasure. But—self-effacement at so young an age! How could she succeed always? There were times when she had nothing much to do, and perforce there was rumination and gloom. It was involuntary, and she made a conscious effort, a tremendous effort, to overcome the demon of discontent. But the demon would come back riding on wave after wave and sweep away her outworn notions of wifehood. Her self-control would, like a reed, be broken into pieces. There would follow such an upsurge of revolt in her mind, raising dark and difficult questions, that she would finally give way to a violent spasm of tears. Because of her training, however, these questions seldom had a chance of entering the area of her consciousness; their existence was only vaguely felt, they were never formulated.

Many a time, when she saw other men, Kiki caught herself experiencing a peculiar thrill of pleasure which never failed to register itself upon her face.

What was it she found so pleasing about them? Clean clothes, a clean-shaved chin, well-groomed hair, a smart gait, refined speech—in short all that was wanting in her husband. Kiki was not consciously aware of the reasons of her pleasure at the sight of other men. She would never have admitted that she felt any desire for any man other than her husband.

In her domestic life, she never experienced an exciting moment. When there was no household work to do, she would come out and sit on the doorstep to watch people pass by. When she saw well-turned out and smart young men pass by, she would think of their wives and envy them. A wave of pleasure would swell within her heart, which however would be temporary. For soon she would be on her guard, remembering the Hindu ideal of a wife.

Her parents had been well-to-do. Being Brahmins, they depended mainly on the income from their *yajmans*. But they were well-versed in the Vedas. Her people were not like her husband, worthless Brahmins, Brahmins in name and by accident of birth only. The atmosphere in her parents' home had been different. The place did not reek of fodder, dung and urine. It was surcharged, as a Brahmin's home should be, with the fragrance of incense and ambergris, flowers and sandalwood. Instead of abuse and loud conversation, there were religious discussions and refined and courteous speech. Poor Kiki! What vile trick had fate played upon her, to have flung her from such a height into this abyss!

Sometimes, she would seek escape from her surroundings through her imagination, which alone could help her to break the mean bonds of her everyday existence. In a world of fantasy she breathed the stimulating air of freedom. There she did not suffer a sense of confinement, as in her husband's house. She always saw herself in vast, open spaces, where she experienced a corresponding limitlessness in her own being. All around was emerald-green, with meadows stretching away for miles in all directions. Over the green expanse of her imaginary world bloomed and waved flowers of many hues, giving out such fragrance as God's own world has never known. She would see herself reclining against a tall palm, her cheek resting on its smooth trunk, arms flung around it and her hands moving over it caressingly. Her heart would then break into ripples and her face would glow with supreme happiness.

One day, while in that state of ethereal existence, she saw herself worshipping before a marble *Shivalinga*. She sat in that worshipful state for a long time, her head bowed, eyes closed, her hands touching the 'linga' reverently. When the prayer was over, she opened her eyes in that ethereal state and saw that the 'linga' had been transformed

into a man. Shocked, she stood up. But the look in the man's eyes and the smile on his lips had such a profound effect on her already weakened will, that instead of running away she flung herself into his arms. Thereafter, she passed through moments of golden glory. When, after sometime, she emerged from the state of rapturous fulfilment and the man began to melt into thin air, from which he had taken shape, she saw that his face looked exactly like her father's! Suddenly, she saw and heard a hideous witch chuckling horribly and malignantly at her sinful experience. It brought her back to earth.

The vision fled from her eyes and she returned, full of remorse, to the consciousness of her gross existence—never again to indulge in day-dreams and live another life, of wandering in wide space, bright with colour. A terrible fear, the roots of which lay deep in social and religious heritage, held her in check thereafter.

Now fate took a hand. One day, a maddened cow charged her husband, lifted him on its horns and dashed him to the ground. His knee was dislocated and he nearly broke his neck; he lay in bed for several months. His misfortune proved a blessing for her. It aroused a new emotion in her—the mother's, which seeks to give protection.

Kiki devoted all her powers to the service of her husband, physically and emotionally.

He was no longer her husband and bread-winner. He was more weak and helpless than a child. Without her mothering and care he would not have survived. With great devotion, Kiki kept herself occupied in the service of her husband. All other longings were subordinated to this new passion of service.

She felt a new desire to live, and this desire infused a happiness through her whole being. The fancies in which she used to take refuge visited her no longer. She found deliverance now in the gratification of her maternal instincts. A new emotion was born in her heart from which flowed a spring of love, which left no room for other needs. This was love which asked for no return. Kiki had never before experienced such sacred love.

From a wife, Kiki had suddenly become a mother—without bearing a child. It proved her salvation.

(Translated by T. H. Advani)

THE JUST TYRANT

(Sadarangani 'Khadim')

1. *YOU watch over us every moment, O Lord,
Can I then say You are not in me?
You must have seated Yourself in my heart,
Or else, how could You fathom every secret of mine?*
2. *However great a sinner I may be
Satan cannot inflict on me any punishment;
You pledged Your mercy to man, before introducing evil in the
world;
And there is no limit to Your compassion and forgiveness.*
3. *However much the atheist may claim to know the Truth,
What injury can he do to Truth, what can he achieve for himself?
The sacred river cannot be polluted by a slobbering dog,
Nor can the dog cease to be impure by bathing in the sacred river.*
4. *I took You in as a guest in the house of my heart,
But instead of making a good return You brought me ruin :
How you entrenched Yourself as Master in my house
To make me a door-keeper at my own door!*
5. *It was You, O Allah, who created man
And endowed him with turbulent passions;
You launched him in the world under an ill star,
asserting Your dominance as Allah—
Say then, what favour did You do and to whom?*
6. *A day will come when I will enumerate Your tyrannies
And demand and receive justice at Your hands;
I know of none more cruel and more just than You,
I shall put You up as both the accused and the Judge.*
7. *These are times of rule by the people,
The subjects now govern the fate of kings;
Those who were slaves are now so full of revolt,
O Lord, I fear that Your throne may be shaken next.*

GOKUL'S MA

(Ishwar "Muflis")

WE had left Bhilwara behind us and train was going full speed ahead. I sat in the corner of a third class compartment. Kamala sat by my side. I was holding a book before me and turning its pages now and again. Suddenly Kamala broke in on me.

"Are you dreaming or reading?" she asked. "You don't even know that you are holding the book upside-down."

I startled a little.

"What did you say?" I asked.

"What are you thinking of?"

Involuntarily, I flung the book in her lap as if in answer to her question, and just two words formed themselves between my lips: "Gokul's Ma." "O Gogul's Ma! She was wonderful," Kamala chimed in.

The life of a travelling salesman is a dog's life. What can be worse than being on the move most of the time, and away from one's family and friends? One man works to feed several mouths besides his own—and works how? Travelling all alone at night, and trudging through the bazaars and streets of a town the whole day.

On the preceding Saturday, as I made ready to go on a tour of Rajasthan, Kamala sprang a surprise by saying she too would go with me. I tried to dissuade her, but she persisted and I had to give in.

She had of course reason on her side. Since our marriage she had never gone out of Bombay and she had several relations in Ajmer whom she had not seen for years. She wanted a change and she wished to meet relations, so what choice was there for me?

At six in the morning we reached Bhilwara Station, and in ten minutes we were at the *gurdwara**, which served also as a free hostel for travellers.

The first person I met in the *gurdwara* was Gokul's Ma. At sixty-five Gokul's Ma was able to move about her duties quite actively, but

*Sikh temple; most Sindhi Hindus believe in the Sikh scripture

what impressed more was the kindly, honey-sweet smile that seemed to be imprinted on her face. She was wearing old and faded black satin pyjamas, and over the pyjamas a muslin *kurta***, her head being covered with a longish, wide shawl of white cambric. Her nose-ring was large and prominent.

This typical Sindhi old woman, with a benign expression on her face, had literally made her way into my heart. It was the face of dear old Sind for me, and she stood there to welcome me with a garland of smiles.

Who was Gokul or Gokul's father, from which part of Sind were they, and to which community of that lost land did they belong—these were questions too irrelevant to arise in that instant. What mattered was the woman herself, full of the true virtues of Sindhi womanhood—Gokul's Ma, of whom not only her own children could be proud, but every Sindhi too.

I might have gone on gazing at her in reverence, had she not addressed me before I could introduce my wife and myself.

"Have you come from Bombay?"

"Yes, *Ami*,†" Kamala replied. I simply nodded.

"What a sweet and pretty girl you have for a bride††" she remarked to me in all sincerity and innocence.

My face beamed and I turned to look at Kamala. We had been married for four years, but it seemed as if I was noticing for the first time only now that I really had a pretty wife. Kamala looked down in modesty.

Gokul's Ma must have watched our reactions to her observation. What she thought of them I cannot say, but the very next moment she turned to Kamala, saying, "A fine young man you too have for a groom, dearie."

Kamala and I both laughed in enjoyment.

"I am in charge of the free kitchen here and cook the food for visitors," she informed us. "Everyone calls me Gokul's Ma. Have you come to Bhilwara for sight-seeing?"

"Yes, *Ami*," Kamala replied.

**Long loose shirt

†mother

††In olden day a wife was a "bride" always, and a husband, a "groom".

"You have done well. Put your luggage in this room. Then go and have a bath and come inside the *gurdwara*. If you need anything, just call me." All this she said in her quiet sweet manner.

"We will. Thank you," I said.

"I shall go and put water on the boil for your tea." So saying she left us, and I observed that Kamala too like me kept looking in her direction with reverence, till she had reached the top of the stairs and disappeared from view.

We stayed in Bhilwara for four days. On one of these days there was a tiff between Kamala and me, and I went out in a sullen mood to attend to the day's work. In the evening I returned at meal time, and sat down alone to be served by Gokul's Ma.

"Why did you fall out with your bride, my son?" she asked in a well-meaning, motherly way.

Normally I would not have opened out to anyone, not even to my father and mother, but I could not help telling Gokul's Ma.

"It's like this, *Ami*. Kamala wants me to take her to the pictures. Now, pictures are all right in Bombay, where we cause no inconvenience to anybody by returning home late at night. It is a common thing in Bombay. But here it is different. I don't like to break the rules of the *gurdwara* by returning and knocking at the door after midnight. Everybody would be disturbed."

"But one must consider the wife's wish too now and again, my son," she admonished. "Do not worry about knocking at the door. I am usually awake till past the midnight hour and I shall open the door to you. You will disturb no one."

"That is very good of you, *Ami*," I said. "But why should a wife become so cussed over a small thing like that?"

"That situation would not arise, son," she said persuasively, "if a husband paid heed to things that a wife may set her heart upon. See that you do take her to the pictures tonight."

"Very well, *Ami*," I replied. I just did not have the heart to disregard her advice.

"Do not say, 'Very well'. You must promise that you will," she insisted in her sweet way.

"All right, *Ami*, I promise."

I went into the room and asked Kamala to get ready. What I got from her was this:

"It is all right, we won't go. I am sorry I pestered you. After you went out in the morning, Gokul's Ma came in. Finding me depressed, she tried to comfort me, but at the same time, very sweetly she counselled that a wife should never quarrel with her husband. She recounted to me a few old stories of ideal wives who considered their husbands worthy of worship because husbands toil all day for their wives and children. I felt so bad, I made up my mind never to cross you again. So, please forgive me and forget about the pictures."

I marvelled to the depths of my soul. What a dear old woman, I thought, wishing that all women were like her. She even came to our room to make sure that we were going. As I had given her my promise, I pressed Kamala and we went out.

When we returned from the pictures at nearly 1 A.M., we found the door open and at the door-step Gokul's Ma sleeping on a straw mat. We felt sorry and woke her up gently, but even so she opened her eyes with a start.

The next morning she was naturally late in rising and attending to her duties. Other guests grumbled and murmured but Gokul's Ma bore their reproaches in silence and asked everyone to forgive her. We expressed to her our very deep regret because we had been responsible for the upset. But she insisted that we were not to blame at all.

"An old person's sleep is always fitful," she said by way of explanation. "If I over-slept a little, where is the harm? And visitors do not really mean ill when they grumble."

We were sitting down for our last meal in the *gurdwara*. While serving us, she counselled me again, "Not every man is fortunate enough to get a pretty bride. Be grateful that you have such a one, and regard her as a goddess. See that you never make her unhappy."

I listened to her as I ate my food, and kept nodding and saying, "Yes, *Ami*", "All right, *Ami*."

By the time I finished, my whole attitude towards Kamala had changed. Gokul's Ma had wrought a transformation in me.

After the meal I took out two rupees from my pocket and said to her. "Gokul's Ma, please accept this small amount. I wish I could give you more but I am not a rich man."

"But what should I do with the money, my son?" she said. "I need no money and would not be able to take care of it. You keep it. It will come useful to you."

"Please, Gokul's Ma," I pressed again. "Do not refuse me. You never know when you may need a little money."

"Son, there is nothing I ever need money for," she replied. "My life here is one of perfect contentment. I work and sleep, and sleep and work. Sickness does not come near me."

"Will you not please me, *Ami*?" I pleaded with a catch in my throat.

"All right, I shall take it, just to please you," she said. "But you should not feel so strong an attachment for strangers, son."

"Strangers?" I asked myself. In my heart I felt her to be almost my own mother, as she tied up the two rupee notes in a corner of her cambric scarf.

While I was packing my luggage, Gokul's Ma entered. Kamala happened to be out of the room.

"I pleased you a few minutes ago," she said, "and now it is your turn to please me. Here is one rupee as a little pocket money from a mother to a son. Please accept it."

I could have been knocked down with a feather.

"But.....*Ami*....." I remonstrated.

"Do not say 'No', son. Am I not like a mother?"

There was a look of kindly affection in her eyes and I had not the heart to disappoint her.

We said goodbye to her and set out for the railway station, my mind busy with thoughts of Gokul's Ma all the time.

At the station, I had to pay the coolie and being short of change I asked Kamala if she had any coins on her.

"No, I don't, I'm sorry," she replied. "But I do have a rupee note which Gokul's Ma gave me as a little parting present. She made me promise not to tell you, though!"

A tremendous wave of emotion swept over me and my eyes filled with tears.

(Translated by T. H. Advani)

NIGHT FULL OF STARS

(Vasudev "Nirmal")

1. *FULL of stars, how beautiful is the night!
A veritable forest of stars,
Jutting out of a dark lake
Like lotus flowers of light,
Appearing and disappearing from the vision.*
2. *How beautiful is the night full of stars!
It seems they are beckoning
And calling,
Saying "Come and see our enchanting world,
See and be convinced."*
3. *How full of maternal affection is night full of stars!
As though wearing a sequins-studded wrap,
She has become a still more lovely queen,
And from under that wrap a milk stream flows,
For which child, who knows,
Under cover of her wrap!*
4. *How effulgent is night full of stars!
It seems as if
From the sieve of the sky light is falling,
A veritable rainfall of light
For the earth to bathe in.*
5. *How luminous is the night full of stars!
It looks as if
Millions of glow-worms
Were twinkling in the garden of heaven.*
6. *How happy looks the night full of stars!
It seems as if
The queen of the night, having lighted lamps
To beautify the sky,*

Is celebrating Diwali.

*Once in a while, a lamp topples over
And disappears in the watching.*

7. *How sad is the night full of stars!*

*These are not stars, they are wounds,
Made by the sighs of human despondency
On the breast of the firmament
Which has witnessed for ages tyranny and injustice
Suffered by man at the hands of man.*

(Translated by T. H. Advani)

AN YEAR OF MAIZE

(Gobind Punjabi)

I STOOD on the beach. At some distance to the right a young man from Kerala was roasting ears of maize on a cycle push-cart. The sight of roasted maize called up the vision of my grandmother and a small village in the district of Kulaat in Baluchistan. There were only four shops in the village, one of them owned by my miserly maternal uncle. My granny was the opposite, with a heart like a river flowing. Before the summer set in, she would plant maize, some vegetables and tomatoes, in a bed outside her house, in anticipation of her daughter's visit in June and July with her children. She knew that we loved maize with its grains like smiling teeth. She would write to us every year, "Come, maize remembers you." Maize freshly plucked and roasted is lovely. What is brought into Bombay from the mofussil days after it is harvested is not half as sweet. Even so, as a seasoned product it is always inviting.

I put my hand in my pocket. It was empty. Never mind, I said. Let me go near and get the aroma of it at least.

After I had passed the push-cart, I heard some one call.

"Master! Master!"

A little surprised, I looked back.

"Master, will you not eat maize?" the dusky Malayali said.

Where have I seen this young fellow, I asked myself. Where? Where? But I could not recollect anything.

"Don't you recognise me, master?.....I was with you in the railway train from Madras." He spoke in a well-meaning, friendly way.

"Oh! You are that boy? How's your leg?" I asked, bending down and touching it.....

The train had left Madras at eight in the morning. I had opened a book to read. From the opposite bench came guffaws of laughter. They were presumably a recently-married couple, but ill-matched in appearance. The man was soot-black, the girl the very reverse, fair as though made from milk cream. A beautiful figure, pretty face, a

finely chiselled nose with a diamond nose-top, right at the tip of her nose. The young man was also good-looking with fine features, even though he was very dark. All the same, I could not help wondering that why they had been drawn to each other.

Whenever the chap laughed his left eye squeezed shut completely. He looked at me two or three times and laughed. I could not understand why. I threw a questioning glance at them, but they were too absorbed in each other to notice me. I began to read again. Again they guffawed.

What! Again? Perhaps my bald head provoked their laughter, I reflected. But then I saw that his head was showing signs of wear tooBut I liked their laughter, and could not help speaking to them.

"Are you Madrasis?" I asked.

"No, we are Malayalis", the man replied.

"Then you are coming from Kerala?"

"Yes, we are from Cannanore and we are going to Bombay," he said.

"Look, don't mind my asking, but were you by any chance, laughing at any peculiarity of mine? I shalln't mind it at all if you tell me." I thought that was rather well put.

"Oh, no!" the man replied. "I assure you, we were not. Why should we? I am sorry you thought so..... What is your destination?"

"I am also going to Bombay," I replied.

"Bombay!" the girl screeched. "I wonder what it will be like. We are going there for the first time."

"What, you've never been to Bombay before!" I remarked.

"No," the man answered. "And we are going there now under compelling circumstances."

"Why?" I asked in curiosity.

"We have eloped, to tell you the truth," the young man said. "My friend here is a Brahmin girl, I don't belong to any caste! Society will not agree to such a situation, and we are going to a place where we shall be beyond society's reach."

"Excellent.....that is very well done!" I remarked.

"How's that? You mean you are for it?" he queried.

"I don't believe in caste divisions," I said. "There is only one caste—humanity."

"You have been on a long journey but don't seem to have much luggage," the young man observed in surprise.

"I have luggage enough—a bedding and a suit case. I visited all the big towns in Madras State to book orders and am returning now."

The girl let off a sudden scream.

"Ooooo! look," she said, gesturing to me to look under my bench.

"What is it?" I asked.

I bent down and looked. A boy was sleeping or making a pretence of sleeping behind my bag.

"Come out, fellow!" I ordered.

The boy came out crawling, and shook with fear.

"You rascal, you are trying to thieve, without a doubt," I said to him firmly.

"No sir, no, I....."

"What do you mean by no! Why the devil then were you hiding behind the bag?" I demanded with a show of anger.

"He might be without a ticket too," the young man put in.

"I want to go to Bombay, Sir..... I have no money. If you will be kind enough to let me, my mother and sister will be saved from starvation," the boy explained and pleaded.

"All lies, you rascal. How do I know you would not break open my bag and pilfer articles?" I said. "I am going to hand you over to the travelling ticket examiner at the next station."

"Oh, Sir! please don't do that," he pleaded again. "If you do, it will be the end of me, my mother and every one else at home."

Turning to the couple he said, "You are Malayalis. You know conditions in the villages. I am penniless, but somewhat educated, and I would not normally travel without a ticket. Please do not hand me over."

With his large dark eyes he looked in appeal from Chandran—that was his name—to me and from me to the young girl.

"Let him be there, Chandran," I said coming to the boy's rescue.

"What is your name?" Chandran asked the boy.

"Raman, Sir," the boy replied.

"Very well, go back under the bench. but don't thieve. We'll give you food to eat."

Morning broke. The train was running fast, passing several intermediate stations. Out of the Madras State we passed into Andhra State. A travelling ticket examiner now entered our compartment. The boy stood looking out of a window at the wide and far-stretching waters of the Krishna as the train was passing over the bridge spanning the river.

"Hurry boy, and hide, there is the T.T.," Chandran warned the boy in a rather loud whisper.

The boy looked behind, and saw the T.T. approaching. He tried to duck under a bench but it was too late for that. He therefore hopped off in the direction of the next carriage. The T. T. went in pursuit, from one carriage to another. Finding that dodging in this manner was useless, the boy must have opened the door of a compartment and got on to the foot-board and started returning in our direction, stepping from one foot-board to another, his hands shifting precariously from window to window. The train was in speed. The boy was now beyond the T.T.'s reach. But the T.T. was not worried. At the next stop he would be able to catch hold of him. The train had crossed the river and was now slowing down for the next stop. The T.T. was keeping his eye on the boy. Chandran and I were also looking out of the windows and watching. The boy knew what his fate would be. His eyes were fixed on the T.T. Full of fright he looked down, to gauge for a leap down to safety.

I sensed what he was trying to do and shouted to him not to attempt a jump. The boy paid no heed, took his courage in both hands and aimed a foot for a safe landing, but he fell forward. I ran and pulled the alarm chain. The train came to an abrupt halt. Several passengers alighted. We had to walk over a distance to reach him.

He was lying unconscious. We lifted and carried him to our compartment. The T.T. was in a sweat, and looked greatly concerned. The boy soon regained his senses but had fractured his leg.

"Save me," the boy cried.

"Yes, yes, you are saved, don't worry," I said to reassure him.

"But.....the T.T. is still standing," he said, looking scared. "He will hand me over to the police."

"No, I won't do that, boy," the T.T. assured him.

"Then why are you still here?" the boy asked.

The T.T. walked away quietly. The man seemed genuinely sorry. We bandaged the boy's leg and he cried out in pain. After some time he fell asleep.

"How cheap is life, and how costly a railway journey!" observed to Chandran.

"Life? Life was a mere accident of nature. It has no value." Chandran remarked.

He lit a cigarette and started smoking.

"What is more, the path of life is strewn with thorns," he added in a reflective mood.

"But we have to clear the path by sweeping away the thorns," said the pretty girl, who had started on life's journey as Chandran's life companion.

* * *

Finding me lost in my thoughts, the maize boy laughed.

"Here, eat this, Master, and don't think too much," he said holding out a toasted ear of maize. I took it.

"But I have no money," I said.

"It does not matter," the boy replied.

"How are your mother, brother, sister and other relations?" I asked.

"Oh, they are all alive," he replied. "The train of life moves on, I send them thirty rupees a month."

What self-reliance, I thought, and marvelled at the power of endurance life bestows.

I dug my teeth into the maize and moved on. It tasted good

(Translated by T. H. Advani)

THE BALOCH

(*Ram Panjwani*)

MOHAMMED Hasan was our overseer. Strong of limb and wiry, he was a powerful man, despite his lean build. A Baloch, he was as fiercely loyal as honest. Even today, should I come across a tall, slim man, sporting a beard on a thin, narrow face, with flashing eyes and a voice that rolled like thunder, I am immediately reminded of Mohammed Hasan. The village people and peasants were in awe of him, for he was a man of great daring.

Whenever we went to our lands he turned our visit into a royal occasion, and what a banquet he spread! Even those who had no thought of food just then would sit down and eat their fill. The *biryanies*, melons, partridges were served with such abundance that, indeed. One imagined that royalty had been invited. The reception given to the senior *Diwan** Sahib was very good, but should he be accompanied by his son, ah then, Mohammed Hasan would turn himself inside out for the young master. Not only would *itti-dakar* be kept ready but the village boys, sons of peasants, would be in attendance to play with me. I could play badly but I would never lose. It is now that I realise that such had been his orders to them.

During the siesta hour, Mohammed Hasan played for me the ***Surando*. He so enchanted me with his melodious singing that I could not but help join him. He would then be beside himself with joy. How I loved those duets! In fact, every time I accompanied my brother to Bhati, Mohammed Hasan would spare no efforts to keep me entertained. Now and then he would sit and talk to me about his people and describe to me their valour and their terrible pride.

"Diwan Sahib, by nature we Balochs are a loyal people. Once we pledge our faith we abide by it. It is difficult for us to deceive our masters. Truth is our religion and we do not speak with a forked tongue. Most faithfully we honour our promises. In fact, we are not sons of a Baloch if we cannot keep our word. But Diwan Sahib, let

*A term generally applied to an educated Hindu in Sind

**A stringed musical instrument on the lines of the *dilruba*

no one cross a Baloch or run foul of him, for then, even God cannot restrain him. His obstinacy is a byword.

"Amongst us, the Balochs, there are two main tribes, the Chandyas and the Mangsis. You may have heard many a tale of Chandya against a Mangsi. Their enmity continues since ancient times. Every now and then one or the other is slain."

Shocked, I asked "But why don't you settle your disputes and make up?"

He laughed. "We can get together only when we have squared the account," he replied. "The Chandyas feel that they need one more death to make things even and the Mangsis must perforce retaliate. God knows who did the first killing. A hundred years must have passed and still the vengeance is not wreaked. The quarrel is old but the cussedness is fresh and kept alive. How can it ever end?"

"Why don't the elders get together and iron things out?" I demanded to know.

He answered me with a question, "Which elder will admit defeat and lose face with his own people? Oh, let the feud be on, Diwan Sahib, let it be as it is. How can we settle the dispute at the cost of our forefathers' self-respect? We Balochs honour the dead more than the living."

I could not follow the argument but I did not think it necessary to labour the point with the Baloch. But one day I asked him, "Why do you always carry an axe, Mohammed Hasan?"

"A man must always be armed," he replied, smiling. "One never knows when he might need a weapon to save himself from a sudden attack."

"Are you afraid for your life?"

"The bold one always has an enemy," he replied. "and every mother's son waits for vengeance."

"Why don't you carry a gun, then?" I asked.

"Oh, I have a gun lying at home. But Diwan Sahib, surely a gun is not a man's weapon. You need a gun for hunting. For meeting one's adversary an axe is more honourable. A hero fights face to face. It is easy to pull a trigger but that is the work of a coward. The brave give their foes an equal chance. Won't the odds be more equal with an axe?"

With mounting interest I asked, "Tell me, have you killed anyone?"

All of a sudden he became reticent. "Sir", he muttered quietly, his face polite. "When my axe is silent, does it behove me to reveal its secrets?"

Quickly changing the subject, I now jokingly asked, "You who are so thin, how can you wield this axe?"

"This is no ordinary axe, Diwan Sahib," he replied laughing. "By God, it is lightning itself. I have only to place my finger on its edge and the finger will spurt blood. It is like quick silver. After all a proud weapon has to honour its master's word, has it not? Perhaps I am lean and slight of build but a lion's heart beats within me. The whole of the Thar district knows that this skinny Mohammed Hasan can leap like a leopard. Let anyone come to grips with me, two blows from me will suffice to end him."

Many years passed. I finished school and went to college. It was not possible for me to visit our lands now, but occasionally Mohammed Hasan came to my brother's office for professional advice and for instructions, when most glad I attended on him.

After my brother's work with Mohammed Hasan was over and he had gone inside the house to rest, I would persuade my friend to sit with me and take refreshments. I would ply with sweets bought from a *halwai*, a platter of rice and a basketful of *chapatis*. And he would drink four large glasses of buttermilk, one after another. After such a meal, he would burst into story after story, when he would relate the most strange experiences.

One late evening, while I was in Larkana on a vacation from Karachi, he knocked at our door and burst in, exclaiming in one breath; "Diwan Sahib, Baloch Khamis of the Jalbani tribe has been murdered. The killer has disappeared. The chieftain of the Jalbanies, who has never liked me, is pinning the murder on me."

My brother's first question was, "Did you have a hand in the crime?"

Touching his beard, Mohammed Hasan replied, "Allah is my witness, Sir, I have nothing to do with the killing."

"Then do not be afraid," said my brother, gently, "we will face this."

At this, Mohammed Hasan brightened visibly. "Sir", he said "I am not afraid of prison, or of being hanged. But I should really be guilty to suffer such things. Since I am accused unjustly, I felt that I should come and speak to you about it."

"Have no fear," said my brother. "Come, let me take you to the Superintendent of Police, let us see what he has to say."

It was late when my brother returned. I was still awake. On seeing me up my brother said, "They have detained him on suspicion. The police report says that the dying Khamis had mentioned Mohammed Hasan's name. So they have locked him up. I have told the Superintendent that Mohammed Hasan is a good man and possibly a victim of circumstances. The Superintendent of Police has promised not to use third degree methods on him. If there is no evidence against him he will soon be released."

However, Mohammed Hasan was now in real trouble, for the Police brought out much cooked-up evidence. He was charged with murder and committed to stand trial. And of course he was refused bail. The only saving grace was the police sparing him the third degree methods.

The Superintendent though of a crusty nature, was a man of principles and kept his promise to my brother. Had he wanted he could have reduced Mohammed Hasan to a zero. Who has not heard of what the Police of Sind could do? The terrible methods they used made even the innocent sometimes confess to deeds they had not committed. Those who were out of favour with the Chieftain of their tribe are indeed, in a bad spot. A peasant hardly had any other choice but take his daughter to the Chieftain if so ordered. A self-respecting man might decline and then suffer the consequences, when he could be imprisoned and the daughter would be taken anyway. How could one hope for justice in a place where on one side was the tyrant zamindar and on the other the bribe-taking police.

The Jalbani Chieftain and the Superintendent of Police ganged up on Mohammed Hasan and got him committed to the Sessions. Mohammed Hasan had no quarrel with his chieftain over any woman, but the Chieftain resented Mohammed Hasan's independent nature and had kept looking for an opportunity to implicate him in some way or the other, and now at last he had the fellow at his mercy.

We do not know whether it was true that the Khamis Baloch had uttered Mohammed Hasan's name in his last moments, for neither a doctor nor a magistrate was then present, but the allegation that he had taken his name had been entered in the police records and further strengthened by signatures of witnesses. The Chieftain was most anxious that the police should make Mohammed Hasan confess to the crime, and had it not been for his promise to us, the Superintendent would certainly have liked to oblige.

He could, have, for instance, have tied a vessel full of ants to the prisoner's stomach so that they crawled into his naval. He could have given him the water treatment and turned him mad, or made him stand on his feet day and night, starved him, tortured him with thirst, plucked his beard out hair by hair, imprisoned cats in his pants, had him licked by dogs.....how long could anyone stand such treatment? The Sindhi police often outdid itself inventing new tortures. On many occasions the guilty were let off to be deliberately substituted by innocent victims. Thus it was that Mohammed Hasan was trapped.

At the trial a long legal battle ensued. Witnesses were brought, enquiries made, debates and harangues took place, long speeches were delivered. The lawyers did not spare themselves and for a while it looked as if the defence might win after all. There was no eye-witness. The evidence looked obviously cooked up.

And yet, despite the lack of evidence, the judge gave a verdict of guilty and sentenced Mohammed Hasan to be hanged. This was no justice. It was some kind of nightmare.....

The Judge was an able man. Everyone of his judgments was worth going through for its excellent style and language. He was most persuasive. In this instance specially he had laboured to make a case for conviction. Now why did the judge do that? The answer was not far.

The judge had been annoyed with the defence counsel since some time. Both were Muslims but they were continuously at loggerheads. It was most unjust of the judge to have an innocent man hanged—and possibly he was himself aware of it, but he was determined to teach the lawyer for the defence a lesson and make it difficult for him to get briefs.

An appeal to the High Court was made but somehow nothing came out of it. The lawyer insisted that they go to the Privy Council,

but suddenly Mohammed Hasan put an end to further action, and said in no uncertain terms that he did not wish to prolong the matter.

Mohammed Hasan was hanged.

I felt somewhat shattered. I was certain of the man's innocence, particularly as no definite proof of the murder had been produced and the verdict was clearly prejudiced. When, therefore, I next found myself in Larkana I went to see the lawyer.

"I have won and lost many cases" he said, sighing deeply. "I have obtained acquittals, but quite a few of my clients have been sentenced to life imprisonment or sent to the gallows. I am not so upset that a client of mine was hanged. What breaks my heart is that Mohammed Hasan was innocent of that particular crime."

"What do you mean, this particular crime" I asked quickly.

At this he fell silent. Then clearing his throat he said, "Ram, I should really not reveal this, but on the other hand I might as well, having gone so far."

I sat up.

"It is clear that Mohammed Hasan did not commit this particular murder," repeated the lawyer, "and that he lost his life due to some crazy whim of the judge." Here, he paused, but forced himself to continue. "But, in his younger days Mohammed Hasan had killed someone. When I went to see him after the trial he actually forbade me to make a second appeal. He said to me 'Khan Bahadur, I am most grateful to you for your efforts. Allah is my witness. I am not guilty of this crime. But when I was a young man, I did kill a man. I was not caught but someone else was sentenced to death. Who knows the real murderer in the present case was in court and was looking at me exactly as I had, years ago, watched an innocent man being sent to the gallows. If I did kill a man sometime ago, why should I shirk to pay the price if asked for now, even though through a false case? I am ready to pay now'."

MEMORY

(Krishin "Rah")

1. *FROM the brimful cup of the moon overflows the moonlight,
The moments of life fly away like glow-worms;
At that hour thought puts on the wings of speed.*
2. *As the weight of the past increases on the shoulders of the present
Thousands of sleeping, silent desires of bygone years,
Stretch their limbs awake, and tear open the coffin of death.*
3. *Soft sensations spread through the depths of the heart,
Regrets mix and make up a strange mirror,
And for a moment time itself seems to stop.*
4. *Gradually the shadow of darkness lifts from the mire,
The velvet curtains of obscurity begin to rise,
And from the waves of time a body comes into being.*
5. *Standing in the midst of dream and reality,
Enclosing in its folds all the odours of spring,
Is the moment of my love like a fairy-faced damsel.*
6. *But the hunger of the belly and worry of livelihood face me.
The entire cup of life is filled with bitterness,
Poison flows in all my veins instead of blood.*
7. *The present grinds its teeth and reprimands the past,
Puts the handcuffs of poverty on imagination,
And life watching its wrinkles, counts its passing years.*
8. *With a single stroke of time the mirror is shattered to bits
And gradually the same darkness spreads over mind.
Are scattered far in the storm of time.*
9. *Of a sudden, a fog spreads on all sides,
In which are dissolved all the impressions of memory,
And gradually the same darkness spreads over mind.*
10. *The palace of memory falls to the ground like sand,
Life begins to grope in the heart of the gloom,
Trying to discover the last moments of love.*

(Translated by M. U. Malkani)

THE CLOSED DOOR

(Kala Prakash)

“YOU’LL find something inside this book for you”, she said, and walked away.

Something for me? What could it be, I wondered.

I turned over the pages and came upon a cinema ticket! I could hardly believe my eyes. She had invited me to the pictures, how bold of her, I thought, because she was really a modest girl.

For two years now we had been working in the same office, in two adjoining sections, without getting intimate. I was rather intrigued, but soon it seemed I was holding not a book but a bouquet of flowers. The fragrance permeated and refreshed my spirit. That a book should smell of flowers! It was fantastic. But the magic was wrought by the cinema ticket.

I took the ticket out and replaced the book in the office library, of which I am the Secretary. This was routine work, but never had such a thing happened to me before. It became impossible to keep sitting in my chair and concentrate on work, so I went to the canteen for a cup of tea.

I sat sipping the tea and considering the situation. Should I throw away the ticket or return it to her? I had not wanted to go to the pictures. Why should I? Why should I accept the invitation of a girl I didn’t know much? What if she should have designs on me? Be that as it may, I have decided not to marry. Then why make friends with any girl? She must be crazy! How often she must have heard me declare that I proposed to remain a life-long bachelor! To-day, an ordinary sari costs fifty rupees. Why should I marry and make a woman unhappy? I tried to land in a good fat job, but all I could get was this one. The last job brought me two hundred rupees a month, now it is two hundred and fifty. Is that a salary on which to marry? With no prospect of rising high, I had to give up all thoughts of marriage. Only the other day I had remarked in jest, within her hearing, that if I did ever think of matrimony I would

choose one of those simple Maharashtrian girls, because they could do with two cotton saris—one to wear, one to wash.

I had nearly finished my tea when she entered the canteen. I wanted to tell her it was kind of her to invite me, that I just couldn't make it, but before I could say a word I saw her face flush a lovely pink, down to the lobes of her ears. With the play of emotion on her face something seemed to stir in me too. Usually my mind is calm and composed, but just then it seemed to have got out of control. At last I managed to say, "How is it you are here without your girl friends today? Are they.....," but she cut me short, saying, "I have not come for tea, but only to tell you that you must come to the pictures." Before I could reply she had walked out. She had come and gone so quickly, it seemed she hadn't come at all. But I couldn't say she hadn't come, could I? For right now I had seen her pretty face crimson with the blush of modesty. You must have seen the horizon tinged with glory on a fine morning, and been filled with the desire to see it again after it is gone. The same thing happened to me now. What was first only a stir in my mind had become a storm. Like one dazed I came back to the office chair but I could not attend to a single letter. I tried to concentrate on the papers but I could not. I tried hard to pull myself together, wondering all the time what had gotten into me. The battle in my mind over whether I should marry or not had been fought for three or four years, and now at last it had been won and I felt free and at peace. Only recently I had acquired the strength of mind to decide once for all that I could not afford to marry, as marriage would only bring misery to another person. Would it not hurt me to see that I could not buy her even decent clothes, and no ornaments whatsoever? What, if at any time, she should set her heart on buying an expensive article, should I snub her—as Dada* snubs Bhabhi*? It would be too painful.....That apart, how about the little ones who would follow, sweet like flowers? Should I not want to bring them up as if they were princes? could they be reared decently on Rs. 250 a month?

With folded hands I had beseeched my elder brother not to talk to me about marriage. With great difficulty I had at last wrung a promise from him and mother that they would never bring up that

*Elder brother and his wife

subject again. Offers however still keep coming, and mother cries sometimes but she has now accepted the situation with resignation and given up all hope that I might change my mind. Why the devil does this girl try to re-open a chapter that I had closed? I am damned if I let her do it. Even if I went to the pictures with her, I was going to tell her bluntly not to make such a mischievous move again, and not to entertain any notions about me ever again. I took a firm decision: I would make sure to tell her all that. That put my mind at ease—somewhat. The devil take it!.....Here I was, nervous, fidgety, and looking at the watch to see if it was time to go to the pictures. I showed irritation when anyone in my section spoke to me. It was as if I were reading an extremely interesting book and hated being interrupted. Everyone in the section was surprised because I am known to be, and am usually called, a jolly person. Two or three chaps even pulled me up and asked, "What's biting you today, old boy?" How could I tell them what was biting me?

In that flurried, nervous state I left the office and took the bus for Opera House. I knew it would not be easy to bring out the words I had decided to say to her. I kept rehearsing them, imagining that I was speaking to her: "Nim, don't think of me, don't build around me. See, I have nothing. What can I give you? Anything more than a simple, bare home in which, for the least little thing you would have to wait anxiously for the pay day to arrive, the pay lasting for not more than ten days? Is that the prospect to offer a girl? No, I am afraid, and I am not doing it."

Just going over all that within me, I felt choked. What would it be like really telling her? It hurts so much just to think of it—what would be my state when I was facing her?

I reached Opera House. She also came. She came and sat beside me. Normally I can't sit silent for a minute, but now I was as mute as stone, as if I was under orders not to speak. Several minutes passed in silence. Then, with an effort I became my usual self but simply said, "Don't do it again. I don't know how I have persuaded myself to come, this once. You understand?"

She murmured a reply. Murmured, did I say? Dash it, it sounded like a song sweetly sung. She said, "I like the way you crack jokes in the office, and make us all laugh. I have often been doubled up

with laughter, and I think I have put on weight too as a result. But today. I wish you wouldn't joke."

What, I thought, so I was joking? I said, "Then, you mean, you are here for a row or something?" "Of course not," she said. "On the contrary, I want to be friends—all our life. If you will permit me, I....."

The strings of my heart began to be plucked, and with the poetry of her words, all the strings resounded in rich accompaniment. The picture on the screen was forgotten and for some time I made no reply. How could I? I seemed to be listening to the sweet rippling sound of a mountain stream and I did not wish to break the spell. Soon however I got myself under control and turned to her. In my usual light-hearted manner I said, "A nice place you chose to broach a difficult matter of this kind—in the three-quarter darkness of a cinema hall you are looking at the screen in front, and talking to me."

She turned to me and smiled.

Soon I brought the subject forward: "Nim, you know my views. We have worked side by side for two or three years. Was there anything left unsaid before that requires telling now?"

"I know your views very well," she replied. "That's why I've made bold to speak to you."

"Oh I admire your boldness all right. But I feel I just can't cope with such a responsibility. It would be too great a burden to carry."

"Why do you think I would be a burden?" she asked, obviously hurt.

"Oh don't take it amiss," I said. "But if I should take to myself a wife I should like to provide for her a decent home and all kinds of comfort. You know how hard life has become these days. An ordinary sari costs Rs. 50, a cheaper one would not do for a respectable girl. Would it? And what is my salary?—Just Rs. 250."

"Why is a sari worth Rs. 50 necessary for a woman to look respectable?" she asked. "Are decency and respectability to be judged and measured by fine clothes and ornaments? I come to office in saris that cost about Rs. 15 each—do I look as if I do not come from a respectable home?"

I was confounded. I wanted to say out loudly, "Oh, no, Nim, you look great in them. You've got something else that is rich which shines in your eyes." But I could not bring myself to say a word.

She spoke again, "Would the heavens fall if you did not wear a Terylene shirt and Dacron trousers? Are they absolutely necessary? Are a wife and children less important to have than.....?"

"I say, who the devil told you I am that fond of Terylene shirts and Dacron trousers? I can certainly do without them."

"And who told you I am crazy about costly saris? I can certainly do without them. Only.....only....." she faltered and then said with hesitation, "only, if there is.....love, wholehearted, deep."

My heart was suddenly drawn to her with an upsurge of emotion, and I am sure she felt its impact, because she had begun to perspire and with her handkerchief she dabbed her forehead.

Mischievously I asked. "What makes you think I love you—deeply and.....?"

"You may or you may not at present," she interrupted, "but once I am with you, you are bound to do so."

"Oh, is that so? And why am I bound to do so?" I asked lightly.

"I'll tell you why," she said. "You are against marrying because your wife must have this and must have that. You care so much for an imagined wife that rather than cause her discomfort and disappointment you would live the life of a lonely bachelor. Does not that decision show the love you are capable of?"

I wanted to tease her by saying: "All right, agreed, you can make a little money go a long way, but what about the little ones who would start coming? Will not a lot of money be required for them?"

But I let go. It wouldn't be nice. How could I talk to her about our children when we were not married? Such a thing just isn't done. Instead, I admitted to myself that one kid, or two at the most, would be sufficient, and these could be brought up well enough on my small salary.

Hey! but what was I doing, telling myself this? Why the devil was my mind deciding in her favour? What was happening? I felt limp.

I said, "We are not looking at the picture at all, let's go to Chowpatti."

There, in front of us was the calm sea, above us a sky that was dark, and beneath our feet was the sand. And we were there with

our hearts fluttering. She had sat down, with her head lowered, her hands playing with the sand. I stood looking now at the sea, now at her, and mentally addressed the sea: "My Nim is no less deep than you are. Depths are not your monopoly, take note O sea."

But, what oh? "My Nim" indeed! Why do I call her mine, I asked myself, and why had I begun to be proud of her inner depths? Why should her life or her nature matter so much to me? I knew then that all these years I had lied to myself that I would not marry. I had kept the door of my heart forcibly closed. I had not expected that one day a girl of Nim's type would come and knock at that door and the darned thing would forthwith open and let her in.

It was getting late. With her head down she said. "My mother has received a marriage proposal for me. She is all for it, and has asked for my opinion. I did not answer her one way or the other. I could only cry. That's why I decided to meet you today—and my destiny too."

Her voice was heavy, but each word seemed to cause a flower to unfold in my heart and even the darkened sky seemed to have lighted up.

But again I could not resist a bit of fun. I said, "All right, Nim girl, let's see your hand. I know palmistry and can tell you what kind of man you are going to marry. Give me your right hand."

She understood the joke, smiled and extended to me her hand. I held it in mine. It was trembling. I did not read it. I pressed it softly instead.

But I did say, "The lone boat of my life was sailing smoothly and without a care. Now see what you've done to it. What will my mother say? 'Silly boy, why all this pose of never, never wanting to marry? Why didn't you frankly say you were waiting to fall in love? What a shameful thing for respectable people like us, this love business!'"

Nim split with sweet laughter.

We were like two waves, one overtaking and mingling with the other, and the two jointly reaching the shore.

(Translated by T. H. Advani)

GROCER'S BILL

(Arjan "Shaad")

*I CRAVE for the intoxication of wine in life,
The bewitching music of the rebeck which bestows forgetfulness:
I long to be oblivious of my own being
And to be transported to a world which even dreams may not reach.*

*But just when I happen to ride such a wave,
The grocer's bill is thrust before me and drags me down.*

2. *I long to wander through the sky like clouds, unbound,
Wander, wander, with no destination and aim,
And hear the stars repeatedly say to me, "Come away!"
While I joyfully laugh like lightning.
But as I play a game of hide and seek with the clouds
The grocer's bill is thrust before me and drags me down.*

3. *Drunk with the beauty of the moon
I see in the play of sea-waves the play of my heart's emotions;
I lie in the silk-soft embrace of the moonlight,
Forgetting life's harshness completely.
But even as my fancy takes flight to the beautiful moon,
The grocer's bill is thrust before me and drags me down.*

4. *I drown myself in wine but no longer am I intoxicated,
Deep regret fills me again and again, and I ask,
"What value has this gift of life with the spirit stifled and fettered?
Can a bird be happy when not free to fly?
Why when the heart is carried on the wings of a song,
Is the grocer's bill thrust before me and drags me down?"*

(Translated by T. H. Advani)

THE SCARF

(Moti Prakash)

A LARGE variety of brand new colourful clothes lay in a heap at her feet, which she kept arranging and re-arranging in neat piles inside the box and taking some of them out again.

"Please, for heaven's sake, mother" I protested over my book, "It's so late, won't you go to sleep? Why, it's nearly two."

But today mother did not care how late it got. For years now she had waited for such an evening when she would pack a trousseau for my bride.

"In a moment, son, let me finish this job while I am at it," she replied tugging at a garment, slightly tearing it.

It was a head-scarf, vaguely familiar. Folding it carefully she put it aside. I sat up and stared at it.....memory flooding my senses.

Umar's house and ours had a common, thin wall of unbaked brick. Through it we could clearly hear. In addition, mother had carved a large hole in it with a fish-knife, further facilitating conversation and mutual view. It soon became a nightly habit with mother and aunty to drag a *charpoy* to the opening after they had completed their household chores and regale themselves with gossip and exchanges of news with the neighbours, stopping only when grandmother came back at midnight from the house of Valu's mother, where she went every evening after dinner for a smoke.

Now and then mother and our neighbour got so engrossed with each other's spicy tales that dawn would break and the sky turn light, surprising them.

Umar was a carpenter and he had a daughter, of nearly the same age as I, by the name of Zeenat, nicknamed Zeeni. Since childhood we had been going to school together. It was not easy for Muslim peasants of Sind to send their children to school, especially girls. It was, indeed, by rare good luck that they found a chaperon free enough to take upon himself the task of escorting girls to and fro from school. A zamindar might yet afford a farm-hand, but Zeeni was the daughter

of a mere labourer and as her mother often remarked later: "Zeeni has to be grateful to you for all her years at school. You would not go without her."

Every morning Zeeni arrived at my house, ready and eager to go to school. Or I would go to her house if she was late. We put our books in the satchel and it was always Zeeni who carried it, while I was given a small tin containing chalks and bits of slate pencils. On our way back Zeeni and I often won more such pieces of chalks and slate pencils playing games with other children, gleefully accumulating our hoard, or lost them and reached home quarrelsome and in tearful sulks with each other.

We had arranged with Ramo to sell us each curried gram worth one pice to be paid at the end of the month by my father. In the rear compound of the school grew a large tamarind tree which carried the unsavoury rumour of being haunted. It was said that cobbler Shanker's son, Mulo, climbing the tree for fruit had been so viciously slapped by the spirit that resided in it that the poor boy had fallen down, fatally hurting himself.

Now I too was somewhat fond of tamarind. But Zeeni had such a horror of ghosts that she altogether avoided the backyard and caught hold of my shirt each time I made for the tree. Knowing my weakness for tamarind, however, she readily exchanged her bits of precious chalk to get me the fruit. But on days when she did not succeed and I insisted on climbing the tree, she would stand with her face turned to the compound wall and sob. When I came down she would dry her tears and address the wall: "Tell him, today I am not talking to him."

We had an arithmetic teacher by the name of Master Tulsional. He was somewhat short-sighted, a fact of which the boys took full advantage by whispering to each other answers to difficult oral questions from the book itself. One morning Master Tulsional caught me red-handed at cheating and slapped me so hard that one could see the marks of his fat fingers on my cheeks. I began to weep whereupon Zeeni burst into tears. On reaching home and sobbing bitterly she complained to uncle Chetan. Father was not in, he certainly would have done nothing about it. But uncle Chetan was a hot-headed man. Promptly the matter was reported to the headmaster, who had to send for Master Tulsional in the middle of a class. A delight-

ed Zeeni clambered upon a bench and clapped her hands crying loudly: "See we had Master Tulsomal thrashed too."

Most of the day Zeeni and I spent in each other's company. Mother sent for Zeeni each time I acted difficult over my meals, a device copied by Zeeni's mother as well. In short It seemed as if we lived together in one house. So much so that soon her father and mine were buying little gifts not for one child but for both of us.

On the outskirts of our little village flowed the Penjari canal where Zeeni often went to catch fish with the aid of a head-scarf borrowed from her mother. It was quite easy really. All we had to do was to collect a lot of the tiny fish in the thin cloth and let them float in a pit we had already dug in the soft, wet clay. I would then race home to fetch a vessel to carry the fish in, half afraid that I would come back to find the pit empty, for Zeeni invariably threw the fish back into the canal. Annoyed, I would smack her sharply and demand, "And what do you think you are doing?" Crowing delightedly she would reply, "but the poor dears were weeping so desperately, see!"

She would drag me to the water tap, open the tap full and force me to sit and be drenched with her. Sometimes she would tease and madden two cats into clawing each other and jubilantly call out to me: "Oh, look at those silly lions fighting."

One day she threw a kitten into the tank and the poor thing was drowned. Afraid of the beating she might get, she came to my mother and putting the blame on me informed her of my heinous crime. Mother promptly gave me two tight smacks. It was Zeeni, however, who burst into tears. After she quietened down she softly came to enquire, "Did the slaps hurt you very much?"

We were constantly at loggerheads with my darling old grandmother, teasing her daily with one thing or another. We would take the wooden pipe of her *hookah* and deliberately misplace it or throw it in the barn. Grandmother would get terribly irritated and yell at us, when Zeeni would approach her and most innocently remark: "Oh I see, that old thing? But it's been lying in the hay since ever so long and all broken too. Shall I show it to you?" She would then run and fetch it, break it into two on the way and come and give it to my grandmother, saying: "Is this the silly old thing you are talking about?"

Grandmother was an old lady of orthodox habits. She would allow no one to touch her belongings. Zeeni was a Muslim and in my grandmother's eyes, her touch was unclean. I remember once I was having my lunch. Zeeni sat beside me. Perhaps she was hungry or suddenly desirous of sharing my food.

"May I take something from your plate?" she asked, "Please? Only one morsel." Quickly she broke a piece from my rice cake and had barely brought it to her lips when grannie espied her. Glancing a small blow at her head, the old lady berated the startled child : "Away with you! What is the matter with you, silly girl, forgetting your place! He is a Brahmin and you, a mere untouchable, touching his food! Get away you....."

It was the first time that Zeeni did not answer the old woman's scolding with her silvery laughter. She stood stunned. Two large tears flowed silently from her little face carrying in their terrible rush her innocent love for me, choking and drawing and hurling it into, God knows what, dark hidden depths.

After my grandmother had left us, Zeeni whispered to me in a heart-broken voice: "Why did Grannie object to my eating with you?" I did not know how to reply to such a question, myself not having understood the reason for this unaccountable taboo. I could, therefore, only answer her tears with mine.

After this incident, Zeeni came to my house somewhat reluctantly, because everytime she saw grannie she recalled the glancing blow and her eyes filled with a strange fear.

Having completed fourth standard with me, Zeeni was now to give up school and sit at home. I was sent to my maternal uncle's place at Dari to continue my schooling as there was no arrangement for higher studies in my village.

Dari was not far from Jati, and I could easily have been a day scholar, but I came home only during the vacations. "Zeeni misses you very much," mother wrote, "and has repeatedly requested us to ask you to come down soon. Don't fail to come home during these coming holidays or we shall not hear the last of it from her." Unfortunately during that time I fell ill and could not come home. Uncle wrote of it to my parents and it seems that when the letter was read out to my mother Zeeni was present and had burst into uncontrollable

fears. "Poor girl," wrote my mother, telling me of the incident, "she would not eat for two days."

At high school I did pretty well. After passing my secondary third standard I came to my native place, as usual, for my vacations. Zeeni arrived at the bus-stand to receive me and almost immediately began to tease me: "Ah so, you are a full-fledged scholar now, aren't you?"

On my next vacation, home, I sported a pith hat. Gently removing it from my head, she pointed out: "but, my friend, this is a beggar's bowl. And ah yes, see. It does equally well as a drinking vessel....." she added, pouring two glasses of water into it.

On the day of my sacred thread ceremony it was Zeeni who was the merriest of us all, full of song and cheer, singing at the top of her voice the popular ditty sung at marriage festivals: ".....and my hero will bring a beautiful bride home." Listening to her sweet, clear voice I knew that there lay not only love and affection in her heart for me but grand hopes and fond wishes for my welfare.

At the time of Partition, when it was decided that we should leave Sind, Zeeni was beside herself with grief. For some days before our departure she had begun to work on a head-scarf, embroidering it with sequins, and was in a desperate hurry to complete it. Seeing her thus engrossed, day and night, I got curious and asked "Zeeni, for whom are you doing all this?"

"For myself," she replied shortly.

"Silly girl," I exclaimed, "Did no one tell you that a bride is never supposed to make her own things?"

Zeeni turned away, with tearful face and began to weep softly. One day before we finally left, she arrived with the scarf and gave it to my mother, muttering "Please, aunty, this scarf is for his bride. Do not forget to give it to the fortunate girl. Tell her it is a gift from a poor sister who has yet put in a lot of affection in it....." I stood by, watching her silent tears, deeply touched by her gesture of embroidering a scarf for some unknown woman who would one day be my wife.

And there it lies, the scarf, all by itself on the floor, discarded, mute and yet how evocative! I stare at it; the spangles are like tiny mirrors, twinkling and sparkling, and in each of them stands Zeeni,

smiling here, laughing there, or pouting. In some she is sad and quiet, her eyes brimming with unshed tears.

To me it seems as if Zeeni had stitched her love into the cloth with each of those yellow and green and red bits of thread. Her love that had withered before it could mature; the love that had all the promise and the power to burst forth and bloom but which she had strangled and sealed into silence.

Gazing at the scarf I could almost hear Zeeni gently reproach me, with an effort controlling the grief that surely filled her: "See how quickly you can forget! You have forgotten to include the scarf in your trousseau for your bride, haven't you? Or is the poor scarf also to be on the other side of the wall, the same wall that prevented us from eating together when we were young and is separating us even now.....?"

(Translated by Gopi Gamba)

COUPLETS

(Narayan "Shyam")

1. ***B**ELOVED, you are the vault of heaven and I am the Milky Way in it;
Each breath of mine that moves, moves, not in me but in your breast.*
2. *If you, O beloved, would but turn your eyes heavenwards and be lost in gazing at the stars,
I would transform myself into the firmament and look at you with a million eyes.*
3. *If you but wished, all the dewdrops would form themselves into a mirror,
And the moon itself would make a comb out of its rays for you.*
4. *Silence on the mountain tops surveys the dizzy height;
The hush inside the lake contemplates the depth below.*
5. *Like a hesitant bride entering her new abode, slowly, step by step;
Spring comes into the garden, opening buds, one by one.*
6. *If you would brighten your future, cast away the shadow of the past,
Or soon there will be total eclipse.*
7. *Lovely is the veil of Maya, the goddess of Illusion,
The hand of Woman undoubtedly worked embroidery on a spider's web, as it were.*
8. *Sometimes I view this world as real—
Is it a happy thought or only a fancy, I wonder!*
9. *Sometimes I view the world as a dream—
I have laughed too, many times, at my idiocy.*

(Translated by T. H. Advani)

THE ORBIT

(Lal Pushp)

THE Maharana of Udaipur was a great friend of my maternal uncle and had sent him a special invitation to visit Chitor. "If you would escape the Bombay monsoon", it said, "come away to Chitor-garh for a few months. I am on my way there. Elephants have been kept ready for *shikar*."

Uncle asked, "Will you come?"

I said, "What will I do there?"

"*Shikar*....."

I laughed involuntarily. The report of a gun apart, any loud sound is painful to my ears.

"The animal you try to get will get me first," I said with a chuckle.

"There is nothing to be afraid of," my uncle assured me. "The Maharana is a crack shot."

At the time I speak of I had, in a sense, come to a standstill, become like a stagnant pool of water. I had wanted to go away, run away somewhere. I was assailed by a host of memories, each one like a spear pressed against the flesh, hurting greatly. I had been wanting to drive these out by a change of surroundings. I made ready to accompany my uncle.

Rajput history would be incomplete without a reference to the fort of Chitor. What I am about to relate also took place inside that fort. Because it happened a long time ago, the picture is somewhat blurred, the colours have faded, and imagination may at some points have taken the place of reality.

Cloud shadows hovered over the lake. The remains of a palace destroyed by Mahmud Ghaznavi bordered it. I stood on the edge of the lake. Poonam, the Maharana's sister, was by my side. She had come down from Calcutta and was to go back. My uncle and I stayed as special guests in the palace. There the Maharana repeated to his sister the words he had heard from my uncle: "This young man prefers the smell of printing ink to the smell of perfume."

Cloud shadows on the lake. Restful waters, restless clouds. Like me, outwardly calm and inwardly.....

Poonam said, "Two days out of the five I had wished to spend in Udaipur. But I have changed my mind. I shall spend even those two days here."

"I am glad," I said. "But any particular reason, Poonam?"

She was a free-spirited girl, much more than I had been told.

"I think I have better company here," she said with a faint smile. Her words were like a puff of cool air that suddenly comes and is quickly gone.

What kind of a girl is here, I reflected. Whatever the kind, she recalled to my mind fragrant flowers and shining stars and moonlight and rain clouds and lofty mountains and mountain streams.

She leaned lakeward and dipped her hand in the water. Then, withdrawing it she put the dripping hand over mine and said, "See how cold the water is."

Indeed, it was so cold that my hand was chilled. But in the next instant warmth returned to it, even greater warmth than before, Poonam's hand still resting on mine.

"How did you find Calcutta, Poonam?"

"Find? I lost everything."

I looked at her in surprise. What could she have lost? Had she gained something there that she lost? As I looked at her, back came the memory of fragrant flowers, the moon and the stars, of rain clouds and high mountains and mountain streams. Was it only a fancy? Images were really being called up. But was that picture correct? She was not only like those things of beauty, but at the same time like the dark night, a deep line furrowed by pain, a gaping wound.

Her lips were touched with a light shade of lip-stick. She leaned forward and said in a low voice, "A thorn went deep into me when I was in Calcutta. I would not cast it out. It is still there."

She had come so close that her breath brought to me the faint sweet smell of the lip-stick—which mingled with my breath. I felt intoxicated.

"For the hurt, was there no physic in Calcutta, Poonam?"

Again she leaned over the edge of the lake and dipped her hand in its water. I prefer taking a dip in cold water to shedding hot tears," she replied.

That was not the first time I had sat with her by the side of the lake. Nor was it the first time that she had hinted of her prostration which seemed constantly to drag her mind to the past. She never spoke of it in plain terms. From the little that she had let fall it was clear that in Calcutta something had happened which had cut deep into her, and now she was courageously trying to bear up under the strain. Her brave effort to break free from its hold impressed me greatly. I tried to help her—in as detached a manner as possible, with no motive, as a friendly gesture.

I wanted to know what had caused such hurt. I was curious to find out what experience this most attractive and uninhibited young woman had gone through, the pain of which was reflected in her eyes. I had gradually come to feel that she had not spoken about it to anyone. I was perhaps the first person to whom it was being disclosed, and that too in bits. I too preferred not to know it all at once. I could have hastened the pace of her communication, but I feared to arouse in her a storm of emotions which she was trying to control. That I could not have endured. But equally intolerable would have been ignorance of the cause of her pain and of the story behind it. So I preferred to know little by little.

Poonam's Diary:

March 15

Today Ravindra took me to his place. I had also wanted to visit his house. I wished to see him in his room, among his books. He introduced me to his sister. I had been eager to meet her. I wanted to worship whatever object or person to whom he was attached, Where he walks, the ground under his feet must become holy for me even as a shrine. For a moment I was astonished to find how beautiful her face was. Every time she referred to him it was as "My Ravi." She is only two years older than Ravindra but he tells me she is his "little mother." It is a strange kind of attachment. Because Ravindra will not be able to live without her, she has decided not to marry but devote her whole life to his service. Sushama has however told me that when Ravindra marries she will continue to stay with him.

March 17

Two pairs of lips—his and mine. In the dark, our lips have met irresistibly. As if from one cup we are sipping a heady wine and even though drunk, continue to sip as we sway unsteadily under its power.

March 19

Two o'clock in the night and just the two of us. Ravindra's arm is round my waist. We have broken away from the party and are out on the lawn. We are always trying to be alone. Our love has endowed us with the power to do without the company of other people.

My youth danced within me as he folded me in his arms. Each night I spend in sweet dreams of him.

The sound of the orchestra is low. My bliss is unbearable. I do not wish to open my eyes. I must only absorb and feel it all. This happiness should enter my being not through the eyes but direct through my heart.

But with a start I open my eyes. The hot breath that had played on my lips.....Ravi's lips had been withdrawn. He looked disturbed.

"What is it?" I asked.

"Let's go, Poonam. We must go now."

"And all these guests? What will Shrimati Hemlata say?"

"Please.....we should go now, Poonam."

"But Ravi....."

"I am going."

"What about me?"

"You can remain here....."

I looked at him in surprise.

"Or go home," he completed.

"You will not see me home?"

"I am sorry, Poonam—Sushama will be waiting."

Sharply I rejoined, "The last time it was day, not night, and yet you made the same excuse and left me half-way home."

"I am worried.....I don't wish to argue."

He left.

* * * *

The same lake-side. Poonam picked up a pebble and flung it into the water. It fell with a plop, causing disturbance, a dreadful disturbance. I looked at her. It seemed as if she had not cast that stone

but something from within her had done it, something that had oppressed her. A circle formed in the water and widened till it enclosed our shadows. She turned and looked at me. She noticed that my eyes were fixed on her.

"What are you looking at?" she asked.

"At you, Poonam."

"I was watching the circle grow bigger and bigger."

"I noticed it. I saw you in it."

She laughed softly. The sound of her laughter flitted over the lake like a small bird.....clear, lyrical.....almost like music.

"I flung the stone and enclosed you in the rippling circle," she remarked quizzically.

"That was not a circle. It was a house."

"But the house is no more. It was unreal," she said laughing.

I observed her closely. There was no false modesty in her, no twitting about her words. And her laughter was the same—clear and pure, like a bird's song.

* * * *

Poonam's Diary:

April 4

A vague doubt holds me in dormancy. I am confused. Completely confused. I am not able to put down anything in the diary.

April 17

I cannot bear it any longer, nor do I understand it. What kind of person is Sushama? What if she is Ravindra's sister? What strange attachment is this? If it came to choosing between her and me, whom would he give up? A young man who has to live a new life, as a householder, needs a woman. Sushama is a woman but for Ravindra she is not the woman necessary for that life. At a certain stage, for him she must cease to be a woman.

April 22

"Ravi,....."

"Yes?"

"Do you love me?"

"Can you ask that?"

"One has to renounce something for love."

"That is so, Poonam."

"I too will have to renounce something."

Ravindra gave me a side glance.

"My family, all that has been mine hitherto," I added.

Ravindra looked troubled and confused.

"Then you must do the same," I completed.

"If you ask me to, I will."

"Marry me."

"That is the reward of renunciation. How can you call it renunciation?"

"What I mean is you will have to renounce Sushama."

He sprang up. Sharply he replied, "I am prepared to renounce, Poonam—to renounce you for the sake of Sushama."

April 24

This is shameful. Awful. Improper. Mad. Shrimati Hemlata said yesterday, "I have come across fine instances of brother-sister love. But this is lunacy. Listen, Poonam. I have known Ravindra from his childhood. His mother was a very close friend of mine. He was inordinately attached to his mother. He could not secure admission in any college in Calcutta, so he had to join one outside Calcutta. It was not possible for him to attend it from his home, so he had to stay in the college hostel. After a week's stay away from home he had to return to his mother, ailing. The very next day he recovered, but each time return to college was mentioned he would develop temperance. That put an end to his college education. His mother alone was to blame. From his childhood she had kept him too close to her, never taught him to be away and on his own. It seems that after his mother's death he has sought mother-love in his sister."

April 25

I am not killing time; time is killing me, agonisingly little by little.

April 28

I remember reading a Greek story. About Oedipus. What, is Ravindra an Oedipus, another and worse Oedipus?

He is Oedipus, he is Maupassant, he is D.H. Lawrence, he is Proust. He is all these and yet strangely different.

* * * *

The Maharana and my uncle had been away for two days at a stretch. They had not yet returned. I enquired about Poonam and was informed that she was in the garden. I joined her there and found her very depressed, looking vacantly before her. Her gaze was really directed inwards. It was obvious that she was being tormented by memories. But she was also making a desperate effort to bear her disappointment patiently, without a murmur.....

"Poonam," I called softly.

She extended her hand to me silently. I waited for her to say something, but she remained silent.

"What is the matter, Poonam?"

"Nothing. A sudden gust of air woke me up. A flower fell on my hair. It revived a memory."

I went and sat near her.

"On that very account one must be in love with the past," I remarked.

"The past flows through my veins like poison, and I want to live," she said.

"You saw the fallen flower and remembered something. In that moment of recall should lie great happiness—so great indeed that it must wash away the poison of the past. Even a momentary association in one's mind between a trivial thing in the world and some incident from one's past life, results in great happiness. That momentary association is life.....is art."

"Ravindra must be anxiously looking for my return."

"Then you will return to Calcutta?"

"I don't know—what should I do?"

"Do not go, Poonam. The thorn will enter deeper."

She was so confused that she began to mutter to herself.... "If he did not wish to marry, why did he make love to me? I want to forget him but cannot. I must see clearly if I am not to perish, if disaster is not to overtake me in the future... Listen,—Shrimati Hemlata told me that Ravindra loved another girl, before me. Even the day for the wedding had been fixed. But a few days before it Ravindra wrote to his fiancée that his sister was not keeping good health and he must take her away for a change of air to the countryside. And he quietly left Calcutta with his sister. I cannot forget

this. I keep harping on the thought that this prolonged sacrifice of the man is not a sacrifice so much as a mental malady, complex and incurable. He will never marry because he does not wish to be untrue to his sister; and vicariously to his mother. I... " she stopped suddenly. She could not proceed further. The atmosphere became heavy with her tension. And I realised forcefully that even in that extremely perplexed state she had not lost her balance and was able to analyse love properly, that her reason was helping her to pull herself out of the unhappy situation.

I could not sleep that night. Poonam's face kept haunting me. My mind was full of questions. Would she return to Calcutta? Having realised where she stood, would she still go there? Would not that worsen her wound rather than heal it? Or has she already broken herself free from Ravindra completely? Her head seems to have gained a victory over her heart, but will the victory last? Is she drawn towards me because of her present mental state? Would she be drawn to any other man in my place? Or, is it that she feels no attraction but is simply unburdening herself to me?

I rose suddenly, switched on the light and took out Poonam's diary from the table drawer. She had given it to me to read. There was a great deal in it unrelated to Ravindra.

The next morning she asked, "Did you go through the diary?"

"Yes," I said, and returned it to her.

She opened it and on a blank page wrote something there and then. Offering it back to me, she said, "Read this too. You will know the decision I have taken."

It read: "A man loves anew each time; each time afresh, unshadowed, unaffected by his past experience. But when a woman loves a second or a third time, she carries within her the lesson of her past experience. She can never break away from the gained experience and love anew, unwisely, as before."

I looked up to tell her that I had not quite understood. But Poonam was not there. The curtain in front moved a little. She had perhaps that very minute slipped away behind it.

I had not understood the meaning of what she had written. I had also not understood what had been the nature of her experience with Ravindra nor the state of her mind now.

The next day I made ready to leave for Bombay; my uncle was to stay on for *Shikar*.

"Would you be coming again?" Poonam asked.

I was taken aback by her question. What reply was I to give?

I quietly said, "Like you I carry away from here a deep pain inside me, Poonam."

"No, you do not," Poonam remarked. "I told you about the experience of Ravindra's first love—how he had gone away a little before the wedding day on the pretext of his sister's ill-health. I have learnt a lesson from that incident. I have decided not to return to Calcutta."

(Translated by T. H. Advani and B. D. Mirchandani)

IN SEARCH OF A WIFE

(*Krishin 'Rahi'*)

EVERYDAY I would see Sati standing at the doorstep of our house when I returned home from the office. Not seeing her this evening, I was little ruffled and thought she had perhaps gone out to visit her friends.

But the door was open, and I rushed straight into the kitchen. The stove was burning but the kneaded flour was nowhere in sight and Sati was still cutting vegetables.

Somewhat annoyed, sarcastically I asked, "Are we invited out for dinner?"

She looked up in surprise and said, "Invited out? by whom? Have you any relations here?"

"No, but I thought perhaps some relations of yours might suddenly have turned up. Otherwise, why isn't the dinner ready?"

"Why don't you go and change? I shall not be long now. The vegetables are cut and they will not take long to cook. I had gone out, and was a little late in returning."

It was useless to be angry. So I went to my room and started changing. As soon as I had sat down, Sati brought two or three kinds of *mithai* on a plate.

"Why, has there been a wedding in the neighbourhood?" I asked.

Sati could not help laughing and said, "Not yet, but there is going to be—in this house, not in our neighbourhood."

The piece of *mithai* I had put into my mouth remained uneaten. Greatly puzzled, I asked, "In our house—what do you mean?" She put down the plate on the cot and explained that she was trying to get Ashok engaged and he had sent the *mithai*.

"Which Ashok?" I asked bewildered.

"My cousin's son."

"Surely you haven't ten or twelve cousins? The only one I knew passed away recently."

"Yes, her son."

"But her son's name is Pohoo !"

"Yes, but now he has changed it to Ashok."

"That is very interesting—he changes his name and Pohoo is transformed into Ashok!" She went back to the kitchen and I followed her there with the plate of *mithai*.

While kneading the flour she remarked, "It is quite common to change one's name nowadays. Why, we have four brothers living near us and each has a different surname. The father is Vachhani, but one son calls himself Mirchandani, the second Gidwani, the third Malkani and the fourth Advani.

"Well done! So the malady has spread so far that people now change even their surname?"

"What is wrong with it?" she asked while preparing the dough.

Putting the plate down on the floor I enquired, "What has made Pohoo—no, pardon me, Ashok—yes, what has made Ashok want to marry a third time? Has he not had enough of marriages? We people find even one....."

"Say it! Why do you hesitate? One has been too much for you!" she exclaimed angrily. "Let me remind you, it was your relations who asked for my hand. The proposal was not made by our side."

Finding that the situation was getting out of hand, I pleaded, "No, Sati, I did not mean that. In fact the happiness you have given me, even Lord Siva could not have obtained from his consort Parvati. Are you satisfied now?"

Sati seemed mollified and even giggled as she spread the rolled chapati on the *tava**. She then said, "If Ashok's engagement comes off, he will present me a silk sari and you a woollen suit."

"I see. I do not mind accepting the woollen suit, but I should like to keep out of this matrimonial affair."

"Why?" Sati asked, turning over the *chapati*.

"Because, the match-maker's job is most taxing," I replied. She giggled again and said, "If you don't want to exert yourself in this matter, forget about the suit."

"Oh, that is easily done. This match-making is a delicate business. If something should go wrong, you get all the blame. If it were for oneself it would be a different matter."

*Dished steel plate for baking chapattis, something like a gridiron.

"For yourself! Who would give you a girl in marriage? What have you got in your house? Not even a chair and a table, nor any other decent article. Parents are not so foolish as to cast their daughters into beggarly homes."

"You fly off at a tangent! I do not really mean for myself. I was only joking. Let it go. So, ours is a pauper's house! As if Ashok were a millionaire's son! The way he has been spending the money his father left him, his pass-book will not show more than a thousand or two now."

"He has at least that much. You do not have a pass-book to show!" she retorted.

Sati served me my meal.

"But people marry to have children. Ashok has two already and he is advanced in age and yet you think some one will give him a daughter in marriage?"

"Why not? He is not that old!"

"Not that old. He is eight years older than I. I am 32, so....."

"But he does not look that old," she cut me short. "In fact, he looks quite young."

"Everyone considers himself young, whatever be his age. The question is how young or old does he look to others?"

"That is why I suggest we call him here. I want you to write to him and ask him to be here by Sunday."

"All right, I will write, but have you a girl in view? Otherwise you will only be holding the poor fellow up to ridicule."

Sati put a second *chapatti* on my plate and remarked, "A girl in view? All parents are only too eager to be rid of their daughters."

"Maidens or widowed daughters?" I enquired banteringly.

"Of course maidens. Do you think Ashok would agree to marry a widow? In any case, why should he, if he can pick out a maiden?"

"Parents indeed must be blind to give away their own daughters to forty-year-old widowers with a couple of children."

"Not blind, only helpless. What can poor people do when they have a number of daughters, all grown old. Be thankful you have no daughters, only a son."

Sati served me with a third *chapati*.

"My dear, I make no distinction between a son and a daughter."

"But when the time comes to get the daughter married?" she queried.

"She would find a husband for herself—why should we worry? If a man can choose a wife for himself, why shouldn't a girl be given the right to choose her husband?"

Sati made no reply.

Being curious, I asked her if she had really found a girl for him.

"Of course, I have—shop-keeper Tarachand's daughter. What a pretty girl! She would look beautiful even in soiled clothes," she said with real gusto.

"What a one you are, Manohar's mother! I didn't know you could wax poetic!"

I don't mind confessing that I have a most forgetful memory. In fact the more I am reminded about a thing, the more certain I am to forget it. Sati had reminded me a number of times about writing to Ashok and naturally I forgot. She, poor thing, remained under the impression that I had written to Ashok and expected him to arrive soon. On Saturday evening when I returned home I found Ashok already there! I was nervous that my omission would now be discovered, instead..... "Didn't I tell you, Ashok would come over immediately on receiving your letter?" Sati remarked.

Ashok got up and bent down to touch my feet. I prevented him and remonstrated that he was senior in age and it was not right that he should touch my feet. The fellow laughed and had the cheek to say, "Oh, a difference of two or three years in age hardly matters."

"But, excuse me, the difference of eight years must count?" I replied.

Sitting down by his side, I said, "By the way, how old are you?"

Sati cut in with: "Oh,..... about thirty or thirty-two."

I had a good laugh.

"Yes, auntie is right," said Ashok, giving her support.

I laughed and said, "Yes, your auntie is right," I remarked. "Your promise of a sari has worked a miracle. Usually your auntie is very particular about telling the truth."

Ashok casually informed us that his maternal uncle who was forty-five had married a widow who was a very pretty woman.

"Don't worry," Sati assured him. "I will get you a wife like her."

"Oh, please, not a widow!" Ashok pleaded.

I assured him I had seen the girl. She was attractive, only eighteen and not a widow.

"But auntie, do please make sure she is educated," added Ashok, declaring his further requirement.

"Brother Ashok, should she be simply educated or must she be a matriculate, if not a graduate?" I queried.

"Must you jest? He is not asking for a matriculate," Sati said shortly.

I looked enquiringly at Ashok, and he said, "Oh yes, yes, it would be better if she were a matriculate."

His own face was like a dried up orange. The bones of his body struck out as if the Maker had fashioned his frame in a hurry. His hair was long and rough, like the fronds of a date-palm. I wondered at the temerity of the fellow wanting a matriculate bride!

The weekend passed. On my part I gave up the hope of receiving a woollen suit. When I returned home on Monday evening, Sati turned on me like a fury.

"Is that the way to behave?" she demanded. "Ashok has gone back feeling bitter resentment. You have gone and upset an almost settled engagement!"

"But what did I do?" I asked.

"Did you meet Tarachand this morning when you went out marketing?" she asked in a fighting mood.

"Yes, I did meet him. Who told you?"

"No matter who told me. You said to Tarachand that the man was worthless, had very little money, no job or business, nor was he anything to look at. Did you or did you not?"

Now it was my turn to be angry. "I did not say anything of the sort," I protested. "Tarachand asked me if I knew the man. I said I knew the man very well, I knew the man's father too, and the father's father. I said he was well descended. Then he enquired if he had a job or a business. I said; 'Neither. He has not yet found a business suiting his taste and temperament. As to a job, I told him, one must be at least a matriculate to get a job. And a qualification of this kind for our friend would lower the dignity of his family.' It was a question of principles, I said, and praised him for it. Next Tarachand asked

how much money he had. I said; 'Money? What reliance is there on money? Here today, gone tomorrow. And to speak the truth, when I was shown his pass-book I did not have my glasses on.' I thought I had got rid of the old man and started homeward but the man pursued me and asked, 'How old is he?' I wanted to say that I was out to buy vegetables and not to negotiate a marriage alliance, but I restrained myself for fear of upsetting an almost settled engagement. Instead, I said to the old man, 'We cannot stand here all day and talk about this matter.' So we went into a restaurant.

"There, over a cup of tea in answer to his questions, I informed him that Ashok was not advanced in age, that he was only eight years older than I, that I had one kid and he had only two, and fortunately both were boys who would soon grow up and start earning for the father. As to his looks, I asked him if there was anyone who does not think himself good-looking. So I advised the old man to go and check up for himself. He then asked how much gold he possessed. Now you tell me what I should have said?"

"What did you say, that's what I want to know," she blasted out.

"My dear, what could I tell him? It was a pointed question, very difficult to answer if I was not to give the game away. So I tried to play safe and said that the man claimed to have a box full of gold. How big or small the box is I could not possibly say, but I could find it out for him if he so desired. That is where the conversation ended. Now you be the judge. What did I do to make you so angry?"

"You did your worst," Sati flung at me angrily, "and yet you profess to be innocent!"

Sati left the room in a huff and went into the kitchen. I followed her there and to pacify her I said that when people wish to get out of an engagement they try to make a scapegoat of someone else. That is what was happening now and they were blaming me. "But why do you worry? There are plenty of other girls. You said so only yesterday, did you not?" I asked.

"It was with difficulty I had hooked these people," Sati came out frankly.

"Then why didn't you warn me beforehand? I would have been more tactful, at least for the sake of my woollen suit."

“Oh, go on, keep quiet. You spoilt everything and lost me a silk sari.”

But thank God, the girl's life is saved, I said to myself.

(Translated by B. D. Mirchandani)

GARDEN OF LIFE

(Prabhu "Wafa")

1. *THE season of falling leaves arrived, the garden dried up,
Flowers shed themselves, the branches withered,
The fear of Autumn spread all round,
But one Kusum, bud blossomed—hope was nourished in despair,*
2. *A black bee flew into the garden,
The bud let it taste its juice,
The bee hummed a song of joy;
The bud gave, felt happy in giving—there was bliss in self-surrender.*
3. *Clouds thundered, lightning burst,
Fire blazed in bird-nests;
Hearts of birds and beasts trembled;
But still the sad koel sang, and nectar rained in the forest.*
4. *There was patience in the koel's sadness,
Her voice was charged with honey sweetness,
She was happy with some unknown hope;
There was light within darkness—strange mingling of sorrow and joy.*
5. *The scene around was distressing,
The sea's appearance was fearsome;
Even so, the boatman in the boat,
Was rocking on the waves, in a transport of delight.*
6. *The waves embraced each other,
And merged into one another,
The sea danced to their union,
What drunken joy in that fond mating—what life in that self-losing!*
7. *There was silence at even-tide;
The world's tumult was far away;
The mountain was silent, lonely;
But the inner fountain bubbled, emitting sweet melodies.*

8. *The lake's water, cool and quiet,
Was ruffled by the storm.
Within its breast was anguish hidden,
Yet blissful was the life of the lake, in time with the cosmic rhythm.*
9. *Life too is a flower-garden
Where terrible storms blow,
Deadly thorns pierce the heart;
But I never learnt to befriend sorrow, to hug thorns to my breast.*
10. *I received pleasure, but contributed none,
I knew not the way of give and take,
I knew not the love of the bee and the bud;
Love is made perfect with giving, life is not free without some
bonds.*
11. *When fate turns the garden desolate
When sufferings vex the mind;
When life is full of misery,
Would that I might smile like the kusum bud, and sing like the
koel.*
12. *This world is like an ocean,
Life therein is ever flowing,
Each wave is different from the other;
But in them is the same shimmer of sun's rays, and the same hues
of joy and sorrow.*
13. *Had I learnt to unite from the waves,
Had I learnt forgetting 'self' in the world,
Had I realized the glow of boundless love,
Duality would have disappeared from my heart, a new page would
have been in my life.*
14. *Would that I had learnt music from the brook!
Would that I had followed the way of love unrevealed,
Would that I had felt victory even in defeat!
But I never learnt to treasure sorrow—I have written this song
with tears.*
15. *I too feel forlorn like a rock,
In the jostling world I am utterly lost;
Now that not many moments of life remain,
Why should not I, Wafa, like the brook, have sweet songs?*

(Translated by M. U. Malkani)

THE TRAGEDY OF KIRAN AND KAVITA

(*Guno Samtani*)

KAVITA could not believe her eyes, for as she looked through the window she saw a portion of the past transforming itself into the present. Obeying a strong impulse she ran up to the door to welcome it. There she stood facing Kiran. Both seemed rooted to the ground. Neither could speak for a while. But in the minds of both the same thoughts stirred. They felt they had known each other in other lives, lived before, and the broken threads of memory were being brought together again.

Once before also, exactly as now, they had met and Kavita had asked, "Your name is Kiran, is it not?"

Kiran had smiled and said, "No, I am love's messenger."

"That appellation I give to the postman," she had said playfully.

At this Kiran had laughed indulgently. Kavita recalled it all. Finding her speech—she spoke words of cordial welcome only—un-coloured by what was passing through her mind: "Hello stranger, come inside, what is it that has brought you here after so long?"

Kiran smiled. "No, not a stranger. I had not forgotten. In fact, yours was the only place left for me." So saying he entered, occupied an easy chair and suppressed a sigh.

"What a long time it is since you came here last—three whole years!" Kavita remarked.

Kiran remained silent.

"Where have you been?" she asked.

"The bonds of affection had held me. When those bonds were severed I thought of you," he replied.

"Me? Why me?"

"Because there was no one else within the farthest reaches of my memory."

A vague fear seized her mind, and she asked, "What, is the path that led to your Bhabhi* closed? Is she....."

*Elder brother's wife

The sigh which Kiran had suppressed was now drawn out of him. She put her hand on his and asked, "Tell me, where is Bhabhi?" "The living know not where the road of death leads to. Had I known, I would have followed her," Kiran replied quietly.

Kavita covered his mouth with her hand. Then suddenly she left the room. Kiran understood that a tribute of tears had to be paid to the departed and he had seen that her eyes were wet.

As far as he was concerned he seemed to have lost the power to feel either joy or sorrow.

Suddenly his eyes fell on a picture on the wall. It was called: "Love and Life." He had given it to Kavita one day and said to her, "I do love life, but I have not been able to understand exactly what kind of bond exists between me and the world."

She had replied, "Why, the bond of love, of course!"

"Love is a link that can sever. Attachment on the other hand is a chain that binds permanently. I desire attachment. Help me to get attached to the world."

On that occasion too Kavita had left the room, and the memory of it all became unbearable for him. In utter loneliness he called out: "Kavita!"

Kavita was hearing this call again after three long years. It filled her with intense happiness. Like one under a spell she came back and sat opposite to him. She remembered the day three years ago: "By what name should I call you?" he had asked and she had replied, "Ganga."

"No, not Ganga," he had said. "It must be a name which I alone can use."

She had asked why. "Your name is Ganga, your girl friends call you Asha and the people who listen to you singing over the radio call you Mira. I must call you by a name that no one else will use."

Kavita had been amused and said, "Very well, your name begins with 'K', so you can give me a name beginning with 'K' too."

Then without thinking and for no particular reason, Kiran had suddenly called her "Kavita."

That is why when Kavita now heard his call, she felt as if he was calling her from some past and forgotten age.

But had he really forgotten anything? From his very first meeting with her till today he had forgotten nothing. He had met her at the express wish of his Bhabhi. Bhabhi had sent him to Kavita with a letter and Kiran had introduced himself as love's messenger. He had known that Kavita called the postman by that name so he had said, "I am love's messenger, I have brought you a letter."

When the time had come for them to part three years ago. Kavita had said, "How can I say that you brought me only a letter, and not something more?"

Kiran could not understand the drift of her words. "More? What more?"

"A great deal more," she had replied.

"But.....how can that be? I know only how to receive; it is not in me to give."

Poor Kiran, how truly he had spoken about himself!

But today he had come to Kavita, unaware that his visit implied a kind of giving too.

She was greatly moved. "What an honour you have done me," she said to him.

Kiran looked up at her with sad eyes.

"That in your hour of loneliness, with so many people in the world, you should have turned to me alone, considered me your only friend! You really have done me a very great honour, Kiran," she said.

Kiran replied in a sad voice, "How can I so regard it? Today also I have come to receive from you and not to give you anything. How can a beggar's appearance at one's door be considered an honour, Kavita?"

"I feel that you have come to grant me the very boon I had asked of you one day, a long time ago," she replied in the same low voice.

One day.....a long time ago.....Both were carried off by the same wave of memory to that day.

Two days before that day Kiran's elder brother had died. Kiran's parents were not alive and his elder brother had brought him up. That brother had been the only link between Kiran and the world. Kiran was a strange and lonely child. From his childhood he used

to feel that he was living in a vacuum. Nothing seemed real to him. everything seemed an illusion. During his school and college days he had run away from home twice. His brother had traced him to an *ashram* in Hardwar and brought him back. As king Sudodhana had tried hard to distract the mind of prince Sidhartha and make him take interest in the outer world, so Kiran's brother had tried to draw Kiran out of his shell into the world. As he lay on his death bed, he had enjoined on his wife to do everything possible to make Kiran worldly-minded.

When his brother died, Kiran's only link with life was gone. He had no one left to call his own. In that sorrow and loneliness he had come to Kavita.....

They had strolled out to the sea shore and sat down in silence. After some time Kiran had spoken. "I wish to go far away from here. I have come to say goodbye. Have you anything to say to me, Kavita?"

"No," she had replied.

"Why not, Kavita? You are my salvation. Why must you bind me down?"

She had said, "If I cannot control your mind, I will not restrain your body. Go by all means, but grant me a boon before you depart." And he: "I am helpless, I am unable to give even a boon."

For a moment Kavita was petrified by his reply. At last she had said, "Very well, do not give anything. I will give you something."

"What?" Kiran had asked.

"I surrender to you the bond, the attachment I have with my own life. Listen," she had continued after a pause, "Everyone is attached to life. Today I am renouncing it and giving it to you." She stood and took a little sea water in her hand, raised it to her forehead and added solemnly "I swear by this water that if at any time you should have sorrow in your heart and you do not come and give it to me as a gift, I shall end my life on this very sea shore."

To have sworn solemnly by an element.....to have taken a cruel vow, the vow of ending her life.....Kiran felt with an impact that Kavita had filled his mind with an attachment for her life. She had bound him to herself.

The wave of memory brought them back from the past to the present. The sun had set and it was getting dark. From outside the house came the sound of the sea waves.

Kiran said, "Sing me a song, Kavita"

"What song would you like me to sing?"

He said, "During the past three years you must have sung many songs. I was not here, so I cannot say which one." After a pause during which he tried to remember something, he added, "After Bhabhi passed away, one day I happened to turn on the radio. You were on the air and it seemed you were singing right before me. It seemed that I was able to touch the melody and rhythm of your song. I made up my mind to come and see you again, and before even greeting you to ask you to sing for me. Sing for me the song that is dearest to you, Kavita."

Kavita was overwhelmed with emotion. Quietly she rose and brought her Sitar. Perhaps neither of them thought of lighting a lamp. In the darkness she plucked the Sitar strings and the awakened notes reverberated through the room. Kavita sang to its accompaniment:—

*"Would that my beloved came to my abode today,
I would sweep my courtyard against and again,
And pearl-like tears would fill my eyes....."*

Just then the moon appeared over the horizon, and the sound of the waves became louder, as if to keep time with Kavita's song. The eyes of both were closed. One was singing, the other was listening. But closed eyes made no difference for each was able to see the other. And the inner vision carried them both to a three-year-old scene: Kiran had brought Bhabhi's letter to Kavita which said:

"Sister, you must have heard stories of Sanyasis before whom obstacles were placed to make them give up the idea of renunciation and re-enter the world. Here is a person who desires but is not able to become one with the world. I need not tell you his story. Instead I am sending him over to meet you. He often says, 'Tell me Bhabhi, what should I do with this hankering after renunciation?' The only reply I am able to give him is, 'Your mind is not truly after renunciation. When I go away only for a day, you cannot do without me and soon follow me. Surely, those who seek renunciation are not so

attached'. He replies that that is only worship and those who renounce do not give up worship.

"He is a strange creature and I fear for him because I might not live long and then....."

"I may tell you, sister, that he has great love for music. He can play the Sitar a little and I would like you to turn him into an accomplished player of that instrument. He cannot learn to play it in a school because he would not be able to adapt himself to its atmosphere. He is made that way. I am thinking that music might prove to be his salvation. It is with that thought in mind that I am sending him to you."

That day Kavita had said to him, "Very well, let me hear you sing." Kiran had felt shy and said, "Sing, me?"

Kavita had laughed a little and remarked, "The Cloud Messenger in the epic of Kalidasa had carried a message. Can you not as love's messenger deliver a message in the form of a song?"

Kiran too had smiled and said, "I can only sing before Bhabhi."

"Does that mean that the reply I may give you for Bhabhi you will go and sing to her?" she had asked banteringly, and he had replied, "If you give me your message in a song, I will deliver it in the form of a song."

Both had enjoyed this little joke and laughed.

And that day Kavita had sung :

*"Would that my beloved came to my abode today,
I would sweep my courtyard again and again,
And pearl-like tears would fill my eyes....."*

That same song she sang now, the song which she loved the most. In the three years that had passed she had sung many songs, many new songs, but this song she had never sung again.

When it was over, both opened their eyes, but for a while neither spoke in that silent darkness. Nor did they light a lamp.

There was another incident connected with this particular song. Kiran had learnt to play the Sitar expertly and then they had exchanged their Sitars for keeps. Kavita had sung to him his favourite song and he in turn had sung to her the song which was her favourite, Kiran had sung:

*"Would that my beloved came to my abode today,
I would sweep my courtyard again and again,
And pearl-like tears would fill my eyes....."*

Very soon after that Kavita had asked him to fill up a certain form and Kiran had declined to do so. "Why not?" she had asked and he had said he would not sing over the radio. He would not be able to sing for the public.

"But I thought you wish to become one with the world?" Kavita had asked somewhat surprised.

"I wish to hear the songs of the whole world, Kavita," he had replied. "I can fill my vacant soul with the songs of other people but I cannot give them a song of my own."

"But, don't you see that when you receive, you receive alone, and when you give, you give to the whole world? Do not simply receive and live alone, Kiran! Give yourself to humanity and be one with it," she had exhorted.

"What, have you then become one with humanity?" Kiran had asked and she had replied, "You may find it difficult to believe, you may even consider it vanity on my part, but I have not only become one with humanity—I am humanity. When I sing from the stage in front of vast crowds, I feel that every pair of eyes which is looking at me is mine, every pair of clapping hands is mine, each spirit which is awakened by my song is mine. I am then not an individual, not merely Kavita but the whole of humanity."

Kiran had watched her with unblinking eyes as she said these words and suddenly his sense of loneliness had deepened. For a while he had lost his power of speech. Soon however he had said, "One who is not able to give is bound to suppress his desire to receive, believe me."

Quietly she had replied, "But Kavita is yours unasked."

With sudden excitement in his voice, he had said, "No, I must have Ganga, I must have Asha, I must have Mira, I must have Kavita. I desire all, not one only."

"But Kiran, confined as he is within his own limits, can only have Kavita. To have Mira he must become Krishna, to have Ganga he must become Bhagirath, to have Asha....." she had hesitated and searched for the right name, "you have to become the whole world, Kiran! It will not do for you to remain circumscribed."

In spite of what she had said to him he had come to her today! What was it that had brought him? The binding individual love or liberating universal love?

"Let us have a light in the room, Kavita," Kiran said. As she lighted the lamp he looked at her. He was moved by what he saw. While singing she had quietly wept, and he saw the tear marks on her face. "What use is it to cry, Kavita?" he asked.

"Sorrow must shed tears," she quietly replied.

"Sorrow over memories of the past?"

"What has passed cannot be called back. Therefore it was not over this condition of life that I cried. I do not even wish that the past should come back. I wish to live in the present and the future, though I see that I cannot make these mine."

Kiran remained silent. Kavita continued, "What a long time you took in coming, Kiran! I am marrying next month."

For a brief moment Kiran lost all link with everything around him and even with himself. When he recovered himself, a deep depression descended upon him. He wanted to escape from it, but today he was without his brother, without Bhabhi. He said to Kavita, "You had once declared you are Mira and if you could only find a Krishna you would surrender yourself to him. What, have you found your Krishna?"

"The Mira in me died long ago, Kiran."

"To whom this surrender, then?"

"This is not going to be the surrender of a Mira. He to whom I wanted to dedicate myself could not become a Krishna," she explained.

"That is not true."

Kavita remained silent.

"What you said is not true Kavita speaking," Kiran repeated. Kavita turned her eyes away from Kiran.

"Those who take pride in receiving only," she said in a low voice, "know not how great is the pride in giving freely."

"There is no pride in me," Kiran replied, "I feel nothing but sorrow, believe me."

"And that sorrow too you will not share with another," she observed,

"It seems to me now that without knowing it, I have imparted it to you," he replied.

Kivita said, "I remember one day I asked you for the gift of life. Today you have come to give it to me. I shall always cherish the memory of that gesture. But I find it difficult to believe that he who could grant the gift of life is not capable of giving anything else."

He replied, "You should know that I have not the power to give, Kavita."

She said, "I know that you have the power, but are unaware of it."

Kiran made no reply and she went on, "Kiran can still have Kavita but does he wish that Kavita should confine herself to the limits of her own individual being?"

"I am one for whom Providence set a limit beyond which it would be impossible for me to go," he said. "Do not mock at my fate, Kavita."

Kavita wanted to speak but felt choked. In a low, broken voice she managed to say, "Is it possible that I should mock? It is useless to blame Providence. Providence prescribed no boundaries but gave us the whole world as a gift. In making life beautiful, in its development and enrichment, you have a part to play, and by playing it alone can you find your own fulfilment. Providence too feels attachment to its creation, Kiran! It is a bond that cannot be broken and there is no other bond which is greater."

Now it was as if some one had with a bare touch given clear form to Kiran's vague and scattered thoughts. He wondered why he had not perceived that simple and obvious truth before and why he had to undergo the agony of a long, long search for it.

Had he perceived it before, he would have understood what his Bhabhi had said to him on her death-bed, "I have seen the face of Yama* from my sick bed and I am not afraid of dying. But the beauty of my life is only half achieved, Kiran, and therefore I wish to live."

Kiran had listened to her in silence. Bhabhi had added, "I wish to live through you. But if you turn away from life, that will be my real death."

*God of death according to Hindu mythology

Now he understood the full significance of her words. He realised that his brother, his Bhabhi and Kavita had all tried to enrich his life. Two of them had passed away only half fulfilling their mission. Would he fail and so sin against them? And Kavita had declared that she could not be a Mira simply because he would not be a Krishna!

Suddenly, there was an upheaval within him and the dance of destruction and creation began. All at once he went through the pangs of death and re-birth. After a while in a very low voice, he said, "The walls that circumscribed my being are collapsing, Kavita. Please sing a farewell song to the new Kiran before he departs."

The strings of the Sitar gave forth their deep notes and she sang to their accompaniment:

The waves outside beat, marking time.

The breeze joined the tree leaves in a dance.

The moon peeped in through the window and smiled.

And Kiran felt that he too was a part of the eternal song of creation.

(Translated by T. H. Advani)

SWEEPER WOMAN SONA

(*Lekhraj Tulsianney*)

THERE is a large tamarind tree in front of our house. The recent rains have put new life in its leaves, giving them a green and fresh look. The tree is so beautiful I can't take my eyes off it.

Beyond the tree is a happy synthesis: railway lines below, electric cables above—signs of man's triumphant struggle with his surroundings—and in the background a long and low range of green hills.

Under the tamarind tree sat, listlessly, a young woman. She looked so lifeless, I could think only of bagasse to compare her with—the sad remains of sugar-cane after it has been crushed between steel rollers. It was dawn. She had come and sat there earlier than usual.

From a corner of her sari she untied a few *bidis** and a box of matches. She lighted a *bidi* and took a long puff. The cloud of smoke she let out of her mouth held her gaze, as if she was picturing on its screen what was in her mind. She smoked *bidi* after *bidi*, sitting torpidly all the time, till the sun showed over the horizon. The sunlight falling on her pale face gave it colour.

"Ouf!" she ejaculated. "This won't do, I am wasting my life," she said determinedly.

She picked up her long broom and the large empty tin and got up.

She was our sweeper woman—a young woman with an abundance of physical beauty and charm. Every part of her body was well-formed. She wore a tight blouse. While sweeping she would hold the skirt of her sari well above her knees. It was then impossible to take one's eyes off her. Her clothes could not hide her lovely figure.

Sona came to our courtyard and asked for water for cleansing the place. I noticed that she looked pale and depressed. Usually she was all smiles, and there would be a puckish liveliness in her eyes.

"Why, what's the matter, Sona?" I enquired.

*Indigenous cigarette

Without looking up she shook her head and said, "Nothing, Babu," and almost fetched a sigh.

I could sense that something was wrong. I saw that her wrists were bare, so I asked her what she had done to her bangles.

"Babu!" she cried out in anguish. She tried to restrain herself but burst into a fit of sobbing.

With great sympathy I asked what the matter was, if she was in trouble and if I could do anything, but she would not answer. She went on crying and I stood silently watching her. When she calmed down a little I asked her again what had happened.

"Babu, I cannot bear it any longer. I have endured it for five years, and now there is no reason why I should put up with it any more. What if I am a woman? Is a husband to go on ill-treating his wife even without reason, simply because he is a man? Is a wife not entitled to any respect whatsoever? Am I supposed not to have self-respect?"

Sona was full of revolt, and spoke with vehemence. She was unhappy and rebellious. Seeing her, I wondered if other women also looked attractive like her when they were put on their mettle.

We gave her a cup of tea. She sipped it and felt better. I asked her then what had happened.

"Why not come and see with your own eyes, Babu? He has been lying dead drunk since last night. He looks like a monster."

"Who is a monster? Whom are you talking about?"

"My man," she replied contemptuously.

She sounded as if she hated all men.

When she had finished her work she asked if I would care to go with her and see for myself. I agreed to do so.

To the east of Thana town, there are a few bungalows for government officers. Beyond the bungalows are squalid sheds put up by beggars and scavengers. Sona lived in one of them.

"I am the only daughter of my parents, Babu," she informed me and my wife. "You know that according to custom my father could have asked for and received bride-price. But my parents did not take even an anna. Instead, they gave me some silver ornaments—two silver anklets, two bangles and one necklace. He has taken them all from me by force."

She dried her eyes with the corner of her sari. In a choked voice she went on, "I kept quiet when he took away the necklace and anklets. I was a new bride and could not protest. But yesterday when he demanded the bangles, I refused. I cried and begged of him to leave the bangles* on me, but he beat me and removed them by force. At night he came home dead drunk. To go on living with such a man is not....." She stopped abruptly and looked down.

We reached her shed. Sona's husband lay on a string cot sleeping. His half-open mouth was stinking horribly. At intervals he moaned. Sona's mother-in-law was busy cooking in a corner and was surprised to see me inside.

"You, here, Babu!" she asked in a tone of astonishment.

She turned to Sona and shouted, "You vile woman! How dare you go and complain to Babu? Wait till Ramu gets up!"

Then she turned to me. "Do not believe her, Babu. What harm is there if a man has a drop now and again?"

Sona could not repress herself any longer. She shouted back at her mother-in-law. "What if he is a man? Has he therefore a right to beat me? Am I not a human being? Have I no self-respect?"

She spoke like one crazed.

"I will not live in this house," she said with finality.

Her mother-in-law sprang on her and cuffed her hard, "You low-down woman! You will leave the house? You will go and disgrace yourself? I will break your shins." She turned to me and said, "Babu please go away and do not interfere in our domestic affairs."

After that day Sona became a totally different person. All her happiness disappeared. The twinkle in her eyes and her liveliness were gone. She had lost interest in everything and worked mechanically when she came to our place.

One day she did not appear. Instead her mother-in-law came to do the sweeping. She informed us that Sona had left her husband saying she would never return.

A few days later my wife and I were coming out of the bazaar when we heard someone call me from behind.

*Bangles on a Hindu married woman's arms signify that her husband is living.

"Babu!" the voice said. We looked behind and saw the same old Sona, with the same smile, the same beauty and delicacy, and the same liveliness of manner. She was standing at a *pan** shop.

"Hello, Sona. Where had you vanished?" I asked, going near her.

She greeted us with a *namaste* and informed us that she no longer lived with her husband Ramu.

"I know that, but where do you live?" I asked.

There was a playful smile on her lips. "I have now a job in the Civil Hospital at Thana. I live close to it in a colony for sweepers," she replied.

"Don't tell me you live alone, Sona?" my wife could not help asking.

Sona laughed. "Well, why not? I work for my living," she proudly replied. "I have my own separate shed. Now I don't have to put up with humiliation every day as before." She spoke with feeling and flushed.

We said goodbye to her and came away.

"What conceit!" my wife remarked.

"Not conceit, but self-respect," I observed.

(Translated by T. H. Advani)

*Betel leaf and nut.

I DON'T KNOW WHY

(Parsram "Zia")

1. *THERE is so much deception in the world—I don't know why;
A stone is made to appear a gem, I don't know why.*
2. *My eyes are deceived again and again, I don't know why,
Even though the beloved is cruel, she seems beautiful, I don't
know why.*
3. *When I see a beautiful face I prefer to be an infidel,
And deny the Self in myself, I don't know why.*
4. *My idiosyncrasy has cost me my reputation.
Every day I look for a new face, I don't know why.*
5. *Those I look to for guidance only misguide me,
And yet I keep on thinking them right, I don't know why.*
6. *The heart says one thing, the tongue another,
I have to call wicked persons good people, I don't know why.*
7. *The koel* sweetly cries, but the cawing of crows is preferred,
Altogether contrary are we in our response, I don't know why.*
8. *I am perfectly sane at the moment, with no trace of eccentricity,
And yet a well-inhabited region appears to me a desert, I don't
know why.*
9. *Life is about to end but there is no end to thirst,
But the cup of destiny is broken, I don't know why.*
10. *The eyes have shed many a tear, O Zia,
But my tears are not destined to be valued like pearls, I don't
know why.*

(Translated by T. H. Advani)

*the cuckoo.

DEMENTED

(A. J. Uttam)

SECURING a room on rent in Bombay is a matter of time rather than money. So when I secured one after a search lasting for months, I felt I had found the treasure of a Croesus which I must keep secret from all and show to Asha Rani only.

"If you cared for me even a wee bit you would not keep me in the worst hell on earth—Kalyan Camp", this surly woman would reproach me again and again. Therefore, I was happy when I got a place in the suburbs of Bombay at a rent of Rs. 35 a month, and without having to pay a *pugree**

We moved into it on a Sunday. Asha had put everything ship-shape and gone out to get acquainted with the neighbours and I sat down to read the day's paper. Within half an hour, however, she came back upset and painting. She sat down, her chin cupped in her hand.

"What's the matter, Asha?" I said, putting aside the paper.

Soon she turned on me angrily.

"Before taking the place, you might have made enquiries about it!"

"Make enquiries and let others know that here was a place going, when there are so many people wanting rooms? You had been nagging me all the time to take you out of the hell of Kalyan Camp!"

"Now I know why you got it without paying *pugree*," she burst out.

"But what has set you off? Will you tell me, or will you simply keep on shouting at me?"

"You got a place which is haunted," she said.

I could not help laughing.

"Is that all that has upset you?" I asked. "This is Bombay, not Tando Bago†, you crazy girl", I whispered in her ear.

*Premium

†a village in Sindh.

That really made her mad.

"You make a joke of everything," she stormed.

"If you say silly things like Sheikh Chilli** what else can I do? How can there be a ghost in a new building?"

"The neighbours say that a ghost wrapped in a white sheet appears outside our window every Sunday night," she informed me. "It creates discord between the inmates. For that reason, the earlier tenants left the place."

"My dear girl, they are trying to bamboozle you into quitting so that they might get the room," I tried to explain.

"But surely, they could have got it, if they wanted it? Was not the place lying vacant for some months? The Camp was far better. God only knows what will happen now!"

"What can happen? And we can't possibly go back to the Camp," I said with finality. "Have you forgotten the rows you and mother used to have, the blows people exchanged at the water-tap, and the long queues outside the common lavatory? How could there be a ghost in a new place? This pile was built less than a year ago. Where can we possibly get another place like this without paying *pugree*? Nothing will happen. Don't be afraid. The ghost or its ancestors cannot create discord between you and me."

I managed to pacify her and she went to sleep. Ordinarily I am not wanting in courage, but what with being in a new place, in an unfamiliar quarter and Asha getting the wind up, my heart shrank within me. Tired though I was, I could not sleep.

At midnight I was still awake. Suddenly, I saw a dark shadowy figure at the window. My hair stood on end. Who but a burglar or a ghost could be out there at such an hour, I thought. Soon it moved closer to the window, and sure enough it was wrapped in a white sheet. My hand and feet went cold. I thought of getting up and switching off the night light, but could not muster courage to do so. Suddenly a voice spoke.

"So you have come. I'll go and braid my hair, put the *tilak** mark on my forehead and come back."

**a clownish character in Persian lore with a very long beard.

*Vermilion mark as a sign that a woman's husband is living; sometimes used also by unmarried woman as a beauty sign.

With these words the spooky figure disappeared. I had listened with nerves taut and was now in a sweat. I lay still. Half an hour passed. I felt somehow that it would not return. Collecting my wits as my courage returned, I got up and opened the door. I peered out. I saw some one coming in my direction from the right. As the figure drew nearer, I could see the face. I was dumb-founded. It was the face of a woman. The darkness could not conceal the smile on her face. She came near, and said: "Come!" With a start I shrank back, but she came closer to me. Giving me a searching look, she exclaimed. "No, no, you are not he!....." Immediately she backed away and with quick steps disappeared in the direction from which she had come.

I closed the door. For some time I thought I had been dreaming. As a boy I had heard tales of ghosts and spirits but never had I come across a sight like this. I could not decide whether the woman was a spook or a person alive. To whom had she referred....."You are not he?" Her words, "I shall go and braid my hair and come back" rang in my ears. At the same time I recalled my wife's words, "the ghost creates discord between the inmates." The more I reflected on these words the more mysterious the affair became. When I could think no more I fell asleep.

Asha woke me up in the morning.

"It is broad daylight, when do you propose to get up?" she said. "You will be late for the office."

I feigned fatigue and said I would not be going to the office.

It was not the fatigue of moving to a new house so much as the thought of the previous night's encounter with the 'ghost' which had made me decide to take the day off, but I did not wish to tell Asha about it. The fatigue was only an excuse. I wanted to investigate the matter immediately. All work at home done, I went to the next-door neighbour who was a bachelor and a journalist. His name was Agarwal. He received me with cordiality. We talked about one thing and another. Gradually I led him on to the subject that was uppermost in my mind.

"I am told our place is haunted," I said.

"Haunted? Who told you that?" he asked.

"I have seen the ghost."

"When?"

"Last night."

"Really?"

To convince him I related the previous night's experience in detail. He smiled and rose. He beckoned me to follow him, and leaving the room he turned to the right. As we passed the corner block, he slowed his pace but did not stop. When we had walked past the block he turned to me.

"Did you see?" he asked.

"See what?" I questioned, bewildered.

"The ghost, who else?" he replied with a smile.

"How can there be a ghost at this time?"

"Let's go back and I'll show you. Look well into the corner room."

We retraced our steps and passed the place he had mentioned.

"Now, did you see?" he asked.

"Yes," I returned. "She does look to be the woman I saw last night, my friend."

"That's the ghost you saw."

"But she is a living being," I remarked.

Now we were back in my friend's room.

"Brother, here living beings are turned into ghosts," he observed.

"In what way?"

"What would you say her age is?" he asked.

"Oh, easily forty."

"She is not even thirty," he informed me. "She married hardly ten or twelve years ago and with her husband still alive, she has become a widow. He took a second wife. It seared her body and soul and the agony of it still goes on."

But why does she wrap herself in a white sheet at night.....to frighten whom?" I asked.

"How can this poor thing frighten anyone?" the man replied. "She herself is frightened of people. That is why she goes out at night, in quest of something. I have had many an opportunity, when returning home from my night duty, of observing this ghost's strange behaviour. Once I saw her standing at the window of your room, wrapped in a white sheet and peering in. Forthwith the door was opened and the previous tenant came out. I was amazed to see that she took

his hand and led him to her room. A few days later the tenant's mother let it be known that the place was haunted. The man himself did not contradict his mother. Instead he told her she was right, that the ghost called for him every Sunday night and he was not able to restrain himself. The mother was cleverer than he thought and she made it too hot for him to stay on. They gave up the place. After some days I had an encounter with this 'ghost' myself. I was returning from night duty and passed by her door. She took my hand and said, 'come'. I freed my hand and walked on. I had hardly gone a few steps when I heard suppressed sobs. Involuntarily I came back. I went inside her room. She was crying, her head buried in her arms. I was filled with pity for her.

"Why are you crying, sister?" I asked.

"I don't need your sympathy, brother," she replied spiritedly, in broken Hindustani. "It is love for which I pine. Please go away."

I could not remain there any longer, and came away. Her helpless state naturally distressed me and to this day I feel troubled sometimes, thinking of her."

The journalist's account distressed me too. I returned home and related everything to Asha.

"So you feel that much for another man's wife," she said tartly, with a frown.

"Aren't you making insinuations?" I said reprovingly, patting her cheek at the same time.

For quite some time I did not see that 'ghost' again. Nor was the woman seen again outside. I learnt that she had confined herself within the four walls of her room. Soon I forgot all about her. Suddenly, one evening, while returning home from my office, I saw a group of children outside her room. I drew near and saw her standing at her door with a small time-piece in her hand. Everything inside was in complete disorder. All she had about her was the white sheet, which also was torn in places. Her body was wet, and her hair was matted. The children were saying that she had been under a water-tap the whole day. She was muttering to herself and battering the time-piece. Strange though it was the time-piece was ticking away in spite of the battering it had received.

"I'll braid my hair and come," she prated, fixing me with a glare. Then she burst into a laugh.

I could not bear to remain there any longer and came away with a heavy heart.

(Translated by T. H. Advani and B. D. Mirchandani)

PAPARWALI

(Sundri Utamchandani)

"I SAY, how dare you try to walk into my house like this?"

"Sister, I'm a *paparwali** and....."

"Whoever you are, can't you realise that someone may be changing his clothes?.....Hey! can't you hear me? Why are you rooted to the door-step?.....And darling, why are you staring at the *paparwali* so? Have you forgotten to change your clothes?"

"You're Nenoo, aren't you? Don't you recognize me?" the *paparwali* asked.

Nenoo was dumbfounded.

"You're surprised that I'm selling *papars*, aren't you?"

"Come in and sit down. Of course I'm Nenoo. But I can't make out whether you are Bhoori or Ruki".

"No, I'm not Ruki—she is my elder sister. I'm Bhoori.....What a fine chair!.....This is your wife, isn't she?"

Nenoo nodded.

"But aren't you well, Nenoo? Your face hasn't the bloom it has in Hyderabad.†"

"Bhoori, you too are looking rather....."

"Go on, why do you hesitate?"

Nenoo turned to his wife: "Susheela, this is Bhoori, the beauty of our *mohalla***; I've talked to you about her often."

"Really! So this is Bhoori! This is the famous beauty of your *mohalla* in Hyderabad?"

So saying, Susheela flung back the hair falling on her face with a challenging air, but her face turned pale.

Bhoori sat reclining in the chair and taking a good look at the appointments of the room—specially the photographs. While looking at the photographs she said casually, "Having three children costs a

*woman selling *papar*, a preparation from flour

†Hyderabad in Sind.

**block of buildings.

woman her life's blood, after all. One can't remain the same for ever. Besides, wandering about in the sun and the rain.....By the by, Nenoo, have you any children?"

In Nenoo's eyes swam two tear-drops, tear drops so large that it was difficult to draw them back and even more difficult for a man to let them fall. He asked in great distress, "But Bhoori, why has your appearance changed so much?"

"You haven't answered her question, have you? She wants to know how many children you have.....Woman, we too have three children.....But you have come to sell *papars*, haven't you?..... Susheela could say no more; her lips were quivering with anger.

"O Dheeroo! where have you disappeared, son? Bring the scales in here, will you," Bhoori shouted.

"Did you leave your son in the passage?" Susheela asked.

"Where else should I leave him?.....Look at the rascal's feet. How dirty they are! He loafs about the whole day.....Put the scales on the floor, boy. It will be easier to weigh the *papars*, sitting down on the floor".

"But woman, what's the price per *ratal*?"†

"Susheela, you keep calling her woman!" Nenoo jerked his head in irritation: the word "Woman" jarred on him.

"Ha!" exclaimed Susheela, pulling a frown on her face and sarcastically implying: "What then? Should I call her Sohni, the beautiful sweetheart of Mehaar?"*

Nenoo looked as if he had swallowed a bitter pill. He frowned and sat down in the same chair which Bhoori had vacated a moment back.

Bhoori was busy weighing *papars* on the floor, not in the least concerned with the conversation of husband and wife. "One seer, two seers, three-and-a half seers. Here are four *papars* extra; you can have them gratis. But taste them first, and you will know that Bhoori has given you *kheechas*** rather than *papars*."

"But tell me first how much do you charge for a *ratal*?"

†lb.

*Reference to the heroine and hero of a Sindhi folktale.

**Papers of rice flour, a superior product.

"Eleven annas a *ratal*. Do you think I shall over-charge you? I earn barely half-an-anna per *ratal*, not a pie more."

"Don't tell lies, woman! How can you bring up three children on such a low profit?"

"O no, sister, may my husband live long! He too earns about a couple of rupees a day."

"Only a couple of rupees!"

"What does your husband do for a living, Bhoori?" Nenoo inquired.

"Formerly we were in Baroda, where he had a cloth stall. After the stalls were pulled down, he started rolling *bidis* from which he earns very little. So I make two or three rounds through Pedder Road, Colaba, Dadar, and sell about thirty seers of *papars* per day. I too make a rupee and a half or so and we live quite comfortably.....And now look at this little rascal! Hey! why are you chewing the *papar* raw?.....You know, the loafer has appeared today after an absence of two days, Nenoo?"

"Where had he been for two days, woman?" Susheela asked curtly.

"He says he was at Dadar station."

"Who gave him food there?"

"He served as a coolie."

"You women are strange creatures. If a child of ours slipped away, here or there, even for a while, we would simply die of fear..... But look at the awful condition in which you have kept your boy. Otherwise what a handsome little chap he is! There's nature's own rouge on his lips and what beautiful brown eyes! But you haven't bathed and soaped him for days! His body is coated with dust. Our children will presently return from the garden; you will see how spotlessly clean they are."

"Of course, they would be spotlessly clean, sister. If I stayed at home all day, I too would be able to keep my children neat and tidy. As it is, I hurriedly swallow a mouthful of food and go away on my rounds. Even so, I leave both of my girls in the school. But this fellow takes no interest in studies. He insists on going along with me. Says he would like to earn too. The other day I refused to take him with me, so he ran away. But tomorrow I'll get his teacher to break his shins so that he stays in school."

"It would be better not to leave home at all, woman. After all, you earn only two rupees; you are not making hundreds."

"Two rupees are quite ample for us. Anyway, we are not dependent on anybody."

"Ample for you! Woman, for me, my husband's salary of three hundred is not enough!" Susheela said this with an air of pride which she thought would excite Bhoori's envy. But Bhoori made out as if three hundred were as good as her small earnings. "Well sister, here are your three-and-a-half seers of *papars*. I could bring you more tomorrow if you like."

"What should I do with more tomorrow? Bring another lot after some time.....Here, take your money."

"Well Nēnōo, good bye," said Bhoori..... "Here Dheerōo! pick up the scales, and let's go. It is sunset already." Bhoori was gone.

"Why don't you change your clothes? You are still in your trousers!" Susheela said to her husband.

"Oh, I quite forgot. But.....why this irritation?"

"All right, I am irritated. But you are happy, your heart is jumping with joy, isn't it?"

II

"It is so late and you are not yet asleep," she remarked.

There was no reply.

"What's wrong with you tonight?"

There was still no reply.

"Tell me the truth, turn over this side, will you? You are still thinking of Bhoori, aren't you?"

"It is true I am thinking of Bhoori. But why are you so upset?"

"I know what you are thinking in connection with Bhoori."

"You don't know, and you won't understand."

"How can I understand if you don't explain?.....But how silly of me to ask. Well, you needn't tell me. I'd better go to sleep now."

Susheela turned away her face and tried to sleep.

"Anyhow, tell me what is it you are thinking?"

"Oh, let me alone."

"But, Bhoori has charmed you, hasn't she?"

"Have you gone crazy?"

"All right, I am crazy. You are acting as if you don't understand what I mean.....I've always said that it is a mistake to marry a poet. His soul is always hovering round pretty girls."

"Surely something has upset you today. Otherwise even a child would say that you are prettier than Bhoori even now."

"I know, I know. A man's wife may be as pretty as a *hour*i but to him she is like home-made chicken—no better than *dal-bhat**."

"Don't talk nonsense. Every human being admires beauty. Why only a poet? Do you shut your eyes on seeing pretty flowers in a garden? A human being is Nature's noblest handiwork."

"What beauty have you found in Bhoori?" she asked....."She was nothing to look at. But I did notice how enamoured you were with her gait."

"Susheela!" he said angrily.

"Yes, yes, I am telling the truth. Why does it annoy you?"

"But silly, she is a married woman, and mother of three children!"

"So what? When she was unmarried, weren't you eager to marry her? Don't I know that your father reasoned with you, and impressed upon you that as an educated man you should marry an educated girl—like me? And now you are sorry!"

"Sorry? Have you gone off your head? At that time I was only in the first year of the college, and father did well to prevent me."

"If that is so, why were you staring at Bhoori all the time? What is more, on seeing her you nearly cried. You think I didn't notice those tears in your eyes, which you tried so desperately to keep back. My dear, a woman can read a man's mind in an instant."

"Oh, go away, you crazy girl! Didn't I tell you you wouldn't understand?"

"You're coming back to the same point. Why don't you make me understand?"

Susheela, if you had seen the Bhoori of eight years ago, may be, you too would have cried, to see Bhoori as she is now..... Once that was a full, round face but her jaw-bones were protruding today. The cheeks were pink then, and under their delicate skin you could see the blood coursing—now those same cheeks are parched and, pale. Had you seen her eyes then, they would have seemed to you like

*Common pulse and rice dish.

twinkling stars; but those once shining orbs have been driven into their sockets by poverty. The milk-white skin has turned copper-coloured now, because she has to trudge in the sun all day. When I see a lovely plant withered in the scorching heat of the sun, my heart is torn to shreds. In Bhoori's case, her poverty has blighted her beautiful face and form and my heart bled to see it."

"How can the heart be torn to shreds—or bleed?"

"Sushi, when small-pox some time back pock-marked the tender face of our Saroj, how much you had cried! Tell me, why had you cried?"

"Even today I feel miserable about the disfigured beauty of my rose bud."

"Sushi, just as beautiful houses, good roads and flower gardens are the pride of a nation, so too are pretty faces the pride of a country. Will not my heart then feel unhappy at seeing Bhoori's face and form withered just when she should be in the full bloom of her youth?"

"But I can see no sense in your being unhappy about strangers."

"Strangers! How can my own people be strangers to me? Sushi, we left our homes and gardens, our lands and farms, our canals and barrages, all behind. The only thing we brought with us as refugees from Sind is the glow in human faces. Is it not painful that even that glow should disappear because of hunger?....." He could not speak further.

"But, you were beaming when Bhoori left!"

"I perceived a new kind of beauty in her just then."

"Oh! and what new kind of beauty was that?.....You poets are bent upon confusing simple persons like me."

"Sushi, my dear, if you had observed a little more carefully, you too would have seen that new beauty in Bhoori. In place of the old, light-hearted Bhoori, a new hard-working, self-reliant Bhoori has been born. Did you notice her plain-speaking, care-free manner?"

"The nerve of that girl—the way she went and sat on a chair!"

"Therein lay her beauty, and it gladdened my heart. Her spirit will not let her stoop before anybody in the world. And why should she stoop, after all? For her, one who earns two rupees a day is as good as one who makes three hundred a month. She is not indebted to anybody. She works and demands her payment. And though by

working so hard she has become prematurely old, she does not mind it a bit. That her husband earns two rupees and not ten, is a matter of no complaint for her."

"For that matter, I've no complaint against you, either."

"How simple you are! Examine your inner self, Sushi—it is chock-full with complaints: children are not sent to a convent school; shopping is not done every day; you have not been taken for a holiday in Kashmir; there is no radio-set in the house; we are without an electric fan; I don't accompany you to your parents every few months—how can you travel all alone! On the other hand, there is Bhoori, going about fearlessly, all alone, up and down the roads of this city! Her independent spirit protects her on all sides. Because of her life under the vast sky, on open roads, her spirit is liberated, her heart is so carefree and strong that no false sense of prestige assails her. She has lost herself in her work and so become a true queen.....hey! You are crying!"

Nenoo took her face in both hands and gently asked, "Why these tears, my girl?"

"Because— I never understood you all along. I understand now," she replied, pressing her tearful face against him.

(Translated by M. U. Malkani)

